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outdone herself to the
complete advantage
of the reader!"

— Romantic Times

A *Gentleman* OF SUBSTANCE

A W A R D - W I N N I N G A U T H O R
DEBORAH HALE

A Gentleman of Substance

Deborah Hale

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To Virginia Brown Taylor, romance author and midwife, who
coached me through Lucy's confinement. Any anatomical
impossibilities are my fault, not hers.

And to Dr. Michael E. Hale, my very own gentleman of substance...
and style.

Chapter One

The Lake District, 1812

A CLOD OF rain-soaked earth fell on the coffin, landing with a heavy wet slap. From her place behind the lichened stone wall of Saint Mawe's churchyard, Lucy Rushton felt that sound like a physical blow. A tiny whimper escaped her clenched lips, but the damp autumn wind snatched it and carried it away. They were burying the earthly remains of Captain Jeremy Strickland, mortally wounded in a minor skirmish of Wellington's peninsular campaign.

That *minor skirmish*, Lucy reflected with bitter irony, had cast her into every woman's worst nightmare... unwed and pregnant by a dead lover.

In vain, Lucy bit down on her lip, praying the pain would wake her from this nightmare. She'd worshipped the handsome, dashing Jeremy Strickland from a distance for most of her twenty years. Suddenly taking notice of her, the captain had returned Lucy's regard, wooing her with all the urgency of a young man off to war.

Beside the waterfall at Amber Force, he'd begged the happiness of her hand in marriage. In a secluded glade on the banks of tranquil Mayeswater, he had persuaded her to consummate the union of their hearts. He'd promised to return at the earliest opportunity to wed her in a splendid ceremony.

Even knowing her condition would eventually expose her to censure and ostracism, Lucy could not bring herself to regret what she'd done. How much worse would it be to stand here and watch them bury her dearest love, having denied him the joy of their communion? Without the memory of his ardent kiss and tender embrace to sustain her.

The meagre clutch of mourners at the graveside bowed their heads as Lucy's father, the vicar of Saint Mawe's, led them in a final prayer. One man towered above the others, a tall severe-looking person whose somber funeral habit was little different from his normal attire. Lucy fixed the formidable Drake Strickland, Viscount Silverthorne, with a baleful glare.

The viscount had selfishly decreed his half-brother's funeral a private affair, closed to all but family. Otherwise, Saint Mawe's

would have overflowed with tenants and villagers, sincerely mourning the gallant, agreeable young officer. Rather than skulking behind the wall, Lucy might have taken her place among the throng, free to vent her grief in public.

As if drawn by the animosity of her gaze, Lord Silverthorne suddenly turned his dark, inscrutable eyes upon Lucy. She met his stare without flinching, channeling all her resentment into an answering scowl.

How dare you bar me from him on this of all days? She silently challenged Drake Strickland. *It is your fault Jeremy enlisted in the army in the first place. He spent so much of his life trying to meet your impossibly high standards. Trying to make his own mark. Trying to emerge from beneath your shadow. If not for you, he would be alive today.*

At that moment, Vicar Rushton intoned the benediction. “Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.”

Rising tears quenched the passionate rage in Lucy’s eyes. Looking away from the hateful Lord Silverthorne, she pressed her arms protectively over her flat belly, where Jeremy’s child had begun to grow within her. This was what her love and her dreams had finally come to—ashes and dust.



The Dowager Marchioness of Cranbrook peered down the length of Silverthorne’s formal dining table. Her wrinkled mouth puckered in distaste. Though she regretted the death of her favorite grandson, her ladyship was not unduly distressed. In seventy-five years she had buried three husbands, five sons and four grandsons. Losing loved ones was an inevitable part of life—no sense railing against events one could not control. The marchioness chose to focus on situations more amenable to her influence.

“Drake, what is this dish?” Suspiciously, she sifted her spoon through an unfamiliar variety of stew, heavy in cabbage. “It’s barely palatable. And black bread? My servants dine better than this. You must come to London with me, if only to secure the services of a proper cook.”

From the moment of her arrival, the marchioness had lost no opportunity to urge her grandson to come to London in search of a wife. At the head of the table, Viscount Silverthorne heaved an

impatient sigh audible above the tattoo of rain drumming on the windows.

Impudent cub! Her ladyship bridled. Did he think her eyesight and hearing too feeble to mark his insulting behavior?

"I regret our cuisine is not to your taste, Grandmother," Drake replied with tight-jawed civility. "We are not accustomed to such exalted company."

He inclined his head toward her and his other guests—his cousin, the Honorable Neville Strickland, and Lady Phyllida Strickland, widow of yet another cousin.

Acknowledging Drake's nod with an insipid smile, Phyllida picked at her meal. A bland, sallow creature, her cloying solicitude set the marchioness's teeth on edge. Neglecting the food altogether, Neville concentrated on his wine.

"Personally," Drake continued, "I find Mrs. Maberley's cooking both toothsome and nourishing. I wouldn't trade her Lancashire hotpot for all the glazed pheasant and oyster puddings in London. I'm a plain man. I prefer plain clothes, plain food..."

"But not plain women, I'll wager," Neville quipped, twirling his quizzing glass by its string.

The marchioness held her breath, awaiting Drake's reply. Neville was either very drunk or very stupid to bait his cousin in such a way. More than once Drake had discharged the young dandy's mounting debts with no more than an ominous grumble about the sin of profligacy.

"Speaking of women," Phyllida broke her meek silence, "who was that young lady watching us at Jeremy's funeral this afternoon? She looked positively distraught."

"Young lady?" Drake appeared confounded by the question. "Oh, that was just Lucy Rushton... the vicar's daughter."

"Indeed." Neville grinned broadly. "Does she hang about looking picturesquely mournful for all the burials?"

"If Miss Rushton looked mournful, she has every right. She's known Jeremy since childhood." For a moment Drake fell into a pensive silence. Recovering himself, he continued brusquely, "Besides, girls that age have an exaggerated sense of tragedy—particularly about young men dying gallantly for their country. Too many people nowadays have romantic notions of war."

"You don't consider Jeremy's death a tragedy?" challenged Neville.

"I consider it a waste." A sharp crack of thunder from the storm punctuated Drake's pronouncement. "Jeremy had no business gadding off to Spain, as though the army were an amusing diversion. He had responsibilities. To me. To our people."

"Your people?" Neville chuckled. "My dear fellow, you talk as though your tenants were your subjects."

Her ladyship had followed the volley of conversation between her grandsons like a match of battledore and shuttlecock, looking from one to the other. Now she stared expectantly at Drake, waiting for a crushing return.

She felt distinctly disappointed when he took a deep breath and replied forbearingly. "It is a question of duty, Neville, if such a concept is not altogether foreign to you. My tenants and employees depend on me. The mines, the mills, the tannery—when they turn a profit, families can feed their children and send them to school. They patronize the local shops and keep money from draining away to Liverpool or Manchester."

"Fah, Cuz. You sound like a merchant, not a viscount. Gentlemen aren't meant to grub for guineas in dreary factories and counting houses. That's what tradesmen are for."

"You think it vulgar to possess a comfortable fortune, rather than living off the gaming tables or the charity of relatives?" His restrained, quiet tone told the marchioness Drake was growing more vexed by the minute. Neville was a fool to mistake his cousin's cold, contained wrath for weakness.

Neville ignored the warning signs.

"Old fellow, you are too modest. A comfortable fortune?" He gestured about the dining room, recently restored to its former glory. "Why, you have one of the vastest fortunes in England. You're prudent to stay clear of London, though. Prinny might try to touch you for a loan."

The marchioness glowered in Neville's direction, but he took no notice. "Of course, it isn't vulgar to *possess* a fortune—only to have *earned* it." He laughed immoderately at his own jest. No one else joined him. "I can't think why you went to all the trouble, when you might have married an ugly little heiress with an uncouth tradesman for a father."

"By all means, feel free to pursue that course." Drake's tone sharpened. "I prefer to build something beneficial and lasting, by my own initiative."

"I fear I am not temperamentally suited to such earnest labor. I am one of society's lilies of the field. I toil not. Neither do I spin. Yet King Solomon in all his glory had not so richly embroidered a waistcoat as mine."

Neville sprawled back on his chair, displaying an expanse of that waistcoat. The marchioness thought it in rather questionable taste for mourning.

Still, she was not altogether displeased with Neville. He had provided her with excellent leverage to use on his cousin.

"There sits the heir to all your hard-won wealth, Drake." She waved scornfully in Neville's direction. "How long will it take him to run through your fortune? Six months? A year?"

"I expect to live a long, healthy life, Grandmother." Drake's words sounded clipped and precise, his voice menacingly soft in volume like the first rumblings of thunder.

"What my cousin means, Grandmama, is that he expects me to be worm food when he is enjoying a vigorous old age. Staggering about the countryside. Minding his mills and mines. Wolfing down heaping bowls of boiled cabbage and tripe. And celibate—is that not also part of your regimen, Cuz?"

"For pity's sake, Neville, stop plaguing the poor man!" Phyllida snapped.

The marchioness looked at Clarence's widow with a faint glimmer of interest. She hadn't thought the vapid creature capable of snapping.

"Drake is our host," Phyllida continued primly. "He has just lost his only brother. Besides, your bickering will upset poor dear Grandmama."

"Fiddlesticks!" cried the marchioness, when no pithier oath came readily to mind. "There is nothing I like better than a good family row. It's obligatory to quarrel after a funeral. Keeps everyone from dwelling on morbid thoughts of mortality."

Neville raised his glass to her. "What a philosopher you are, Grandmama."

"Save your oily tongue, coxcomb! I've been flattered by men more skilled in proper subtlety than you'll ever be."

His grandmother caught Drake in the ghost of a smile. She had no intention of letting him get complacent. "Your cousin has a point, though. No one cheats death forever. What becomes of your fine enterprises when you're gone? You need sons to inherit your title

and carry on your work. Come back to London with me and take your pick from this season's marriage market."

"I'd sooner swim in a cesspit." Drake wrinkled his aquiline nose expressively.

"Exasperating cub!" The marchioness was not used to being flouted. "Were you counting on Jeremy to supply you with heirs? Now you'll have to do the deed yourself, my boy."

Drake rose abruptly from his chair. The boy cut quite an imposing figure these days, his grandmother grudgingly admitted. Though his long, angular face gave him a gaunt look by times, he had the lean muscularity of his late grandfather. A far cry from the sickly boy whose life the family had despaired of.

"Consider this discussion closed, Grandmother. I am not a child you can cane into submission. Now, if you will excuse me, I mean to go for a ride before I retire."

"Oh, Drake, you mustn't!" Phyllida gestured toward the room's large windows, each composed of over a hundred small panes. Judging by the force with which the rain thrashed against them, it was being driven by a fierce westerly. "It's raining fit to sink Noah's Ark."

Already halfway to the door, Drake shrugged his wide shoulders. "Never fear, Phyllida. I have yet to dissolve in water. Besides, I prefer the impersonal hostility of nature to Grandmother's cherished family quarrels. Good night, everyone. I trust the lack of company won't spoil your enjoyment of my port, Neville."

He closed the door quietly, but firmly, behind him.

Neville hoisted his feet up to rest on the edge of the highly polished mahogany table. "Not in the least, my dear fellow," he chuckled in reply to his absent cousin. "Not in the least."

For two pence, the marchioness would have garroted her grandson with the string of his own monocle.



Drake was well soaked by the time he reached the stables. The chill rain had not cooled his smoldering temper, though.

"Evening your lordship." One of the stablemen touched his cap in greeting, surveying his master with obvious puzzlement. "Is there aught I can do for you tonight?"

Compared with Silverthorne's dining room, the stables looked

invitingly tranquil. Drake inhaled the soothing aroma of leather, horses and sweet dry hay.

“I fancy a ride before bed. Saddle up the Spaniard.”

Whatever he might have thought of the master’s whim, the stableman was quick to follow his orders.

Once saddled and mounted, the big black stallion strained eagerly to get out into the storm. Pointing his horse toward an expanse of open countryside, Drake rode into the darkness. Gusts of wind drove the rain into his face, taking his breath away. Rivulets of water ran down his cheeks like tears. Abandoning a lifetime of painstaking civility, he gave himself up to the savagery of the storm. Fury and anguish warred within him, as he allowed himself the luxury of experiencing raw emotion for the first time since receiving word of his young half-brother’s death.

For fifteen years he had striven with might and main to resurrect Silverthorne from the ashes of his late father’s ruin. To what end? For Neville to mortgage everything to the hilt and gamble it all away? For Phyllida’s nasty little Reginald, to do who knew what? Whatever else his grandmother might be, Drake readily admitted she was no fool. He *had* been relying on Jeremy to provide him with an heir. Now, if he hoped to salvage his life’s work for the future, *he* would have to perform that odious chore.

He had gone to London once in a flush of youthful naiveté. There, he’d been so abominably used as to sour him on the idea of matrimony ever since. Why could Jeremy not have taken a wife before rushing off to fight Napoleon’s armies? What had possessed him to take up a commission in the first place? Heedless. Imprudent. Unreliable.

Suddenly, Drake pulled his mount up short and headed back home. He’d let his self-control slip quite enough for one night. He had no intention of handing everything to Neville on a silver platter by catching his death of ague. Before he returned to a warm bed and a scalding cup of Mrs. Maberley’s cambric tea, however, he had one stop to make.

A faint light flickered in the old stone sanctuary of Saint Mawe’s. Drake tethered his horse by the eastern wall, sheltered from the wind. It was foolish of him to come here, he supposed. But since he’d already indulged in an orgy of foolishness by riding out on so wild a night, he might as well purge it from his system. Something compelled him to kneel by Jeremy’s grave and ask, *Brother, why did*

you desert me?

Drake picked his way through the old graveyard, following a winding route around the haphazardly arranged tombstones. So loud was the wind and so fiercely was he concentrating to avoid a fall, that he scarcely heard the sound of weeping until he was almost on top of the source. His leg brushed against a small figure huddled beside Jeremy's grave.

What was a child doing loose in a graveyard on a night like this? If Drake Strickland had a weakness, it was for anyone in need of his aid or protection. Abandoning his plan to commune with his brother's ghost, he hoisted the little stray into his arms and carefully wended his way back to the church. Finding the vestry door unlocked, he pushed it open with his shoulder. Only when he had settled into a pew and relinquished his burden did he recognize Lucy Rushton.

"What the...? Miss Rushton, what are you doing here?"

Though admittedly not the most perceptive of men where women were concerned, Drake could tell the young lady was fighting to master turbulent emotions. Distractedly, she pushed the rain-soaked hair out of her eyes. The wetness made it look quite brown. Ordinarily, it curled in delicate tendrils around her face, a warm shade of gold.

"Forgive me, your lordship." Her words sounded muffled as if by a head cold, but the tone was icily formal. "I know you endow my father's living, but I had no idea you counted the graveyard as your personal property. Excuse me for trespassing."

For some reason, her haughty reply made Drake want to smile with admiration. She looked so forlorn—drenched and dripping, eyes and nose ruddy from weeping. Yet there was a spark in Lucy Rushton that no amount of rain or misfortune could quench.

"You know very well I don't own the graveyard." Fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief, he handed it to her in a conciliatory gesture. After all, he had no more quarrel with her than she could reasonably have with him. "Even if I did, you would be welcome to come and go as you pleased."

Many a time while riding about his estate, he'd come upon Lucy Rushton sitting under a tree or perched on a stile with an open book spread over her knees and a plump apple half-eaten in one hand. Engrossed in her reading or her daydreams, she seldom noticed him. Yet, from those brief encounters he'd absorbed a measure of

her contentment, going on his way in a strangely lightened mood.

Lucy scrubbed at her eyes, which only succeeded in making them redder. “*Would* I be welcome? I wasn’t welcome this afternoon when you buried Captain Strickland.”

She made a thorough job of blowing her nose. Loud and wet, it sounded intentionally rude.

“Not welcome?” Drake looked at her in frank astonishment. “What nonsense, I...”

“It was very badly done, barring everyone but family. Who were those people, anyway? That ridiculous creature with the garish waistcoat and quizzing glass didn’t appear the least bit grieved. I’d swear he was gloating.”

“Cousin Neville, the son of my father’s brother.” Drake didn’t try to deny Lucy’s opinion of his cousin.

“I recognized your grandmother, but who was the younger lady? I’ve never seen her at Silverthorne before.”

“Lady Phyllida Strickland, widow of my cousin Clarence.” If asked, Drake could not have told why he answered her peremptory interrogation so readily.

“Oh.” His account of Phyllida’s identity appeared to confound Miss Rushton for a moment. Then her inexplicable indignation gathered strength again. “Those people may be Captain Strickland’s relatives. But I doubt if they knew him or cared for him as well as many of his old friends.”

Her words trailed off as fresh tears sprang into her wide set brown eyes. Drake reached out to take her hand but she pushed him away. In the split second they were in contact, he could feel her trembling.

“You must be freezing. I’d offer you my coat, but I fear it would do little good, sodden as it is.”

“F-f-father...” She was shivering in earnest now, her teeth chattering rhythmically. “F-f-father keeps a s-s-spare surplice in the v-v-vestry.”

Rising from the pew, Drake strode down the side aisle to fetch the vicar’s spare surplice. He wrapped it around her as best he could.

“Believe me, Miss Rushton, it was never my intention to slight you. I only wanted to spare my tenants any obligation to attend the funeral. If you’d spoken to me beforehand, I would have welcomed you to join the family. Jeremy was very fond of you.”

In the perverse, puzzling manner of women, Lucy greeted his

attempt at kindness with a fresh effusion of tears.

“Dash it all! What’s the matter now? You always struck me as a sensible person. I must say, I find your reaction to Jeremy’s death exaggerated quite out of proportion. Just because you didn’t get a front-row seat for his funeral is no cause to go courting consumption by keeping a graveside vigil in the pouring rain.”

Bluster had no better effect than solicitude. Lucy Rushton bent her head practically into her lap, weeping in loud sobs that racked her delicate frame.

“There, there.” Drake patted her shoulder in an awkward gesture of sympathy. He was beginning to wish he’d stayed back at Silverthorne. “Don’t take on so. I’m sorry if I said anything to offend you.”

He struggled to recall what he’d said that might have caused this outburst. “You must stop. Otherwise you’ll make yourself ill.”

Then, as though she considered his warning an invitation, Lucy Rushton vomited all over the flagstone floor, the kneeling bench, and Drake’s Hessians. Fortunately for his boots, she had little on her stomach.

Afterward, Drake wondered what had prompted his uncharacteristic flash of insight. Grasping Lucy Rushton by the shoulders, he looked her straight in the eye.

“You’re carrying my brother’s child,” he said with complete conviction.

Her chin trembled, but she did not flinch from his look. With only the barest nod, she confirmed Drake’s preposterous charge. His hands slipped from her shoulders, limp with shock.

Lucy unwadded his handkerchief and daubed at the mess on the chapel floor. “Go ahead. Say what you’re thinking. I’m a harlot—a wanton. I deserve everything that’s coming to me.”

Suddenly the stock around Drake’s throat felt very tight. He had a powerful urge to dig up Jeremy’s corpse so he could have the satisfaction of strangling his brother. Damn him! With his golden good looks and ingratiating manner, Jeremy always had more women than he knew what to do with. Drake hadn’t cared how much of his allowance the young fool spent on trinkets for actresses and barmaids. But to take advantage of an innocent like Lucy Rushton was utterly insupportable!

“Wanton?” His lips twitched involuntarily at using such a word to describe her. “Nonsense. My dear child, you could not behave in a

wanton manner if you tried.”

He scarcely knew what to make of it when she flared up, “I am *not* a child! I am every day of twenty. I have been to Bath.”

Signifying what, exactly? Drake wondered. He opened his mouth to explain he’d meant no offense, quite the contrary.

She cut him off. “How do you know what I’m capable of? You know nothing about me. Just go away and leave me alone.”

“Perhaps I would rather stay and commiserate. It appears Jeremy’s death has put us both in a spot of bother.”

“Bother?” Sharp and shrill, the word echoed off the chapel’s stone walls. “Is that what you call it? When my condition becomes known, I will be an outcast. My child will be farmed out to strangers or to the harsh mercy of a foundlings’ hospital. What bother of yours can possibly compare with that?”

“Only that I shall be forced to marry, against my inclination, to provide myself with an heir. Otherwise that foppish cousin of mine stands to inherit Silverthorne.”

“Forced to marry? Poor man. You make it sound as appealing as a hanging. Jeremy did not shy from it as you do. He planned to marry me on his next leave.”

Drake wished he could believe that as sincerely as she appeared to. “A pity he did not marry you before he went away. It would have spared us both considerable distress.”

Her anger collapsed on itself, like a punctured soap bubble. “Forgive me, your lordship. I have abused your patience inexcusably this evening. I must get back to the vicarage before Father misses me. I trust you will keep my secret for as long as need be.”

She rose to leave.

“How far along are you?” Drake called after her.

His abrupt question stopped Lucy. “I beg your pardon?”

“How long... since you conceived the child?”

She answered without hesitation. “Six weeks.” Musing softly, she added, “We only made love once, the day before he left for Spain.”

Drake drew a deep breath. He was about to dive headlong into murky, uncharted waters. Unfortunately, his bothersome conscience would let him do no less. He must speak now, before he lost his nerve.

“In that case, I propose... a mutually beneficial solution to our problems.”

Chapter Two

“MARRIED? DRAKE, YOU can’t mean it.” A morsel of egg slid from his grandmother’s spoon and fell quivering onto her saucer.

Neville and Phyllida exchanged a glance, two pair of eyebrows raised in surprise and consternation. Drake felt a rush of satisfaction at having ambushed his family so neatly. This was their payback for last night’s dinner.

“I assure you, Grandmother, I am quite in earnest.” Drake cheerfully tucked into his breakfast.

“To the vicar’s daughter?” Phyllida blinked her bulging eyes. “But you are a gentleman of substance, Drake.”

“All the more reason I can dispense with the bother of pursuing an heiress,” he replied with exaggerated good humor.

“Decided to dive into the cess pit after all, have you Cuz?” Neville weighed in with his contribution. “I marvel at how rapidly your scruples deserted you.”

“If you recall...” Drake could not keep the muscles of his jaw from tensing. “I was speaking of that matrimonial cattle market they call *The Season*, not of marriage in general. Were you too drunk to mark the difference?”

Breathing onto his quizzing glass, Neville made a show of rubbing it clean with his napkin. “My dear fellow, you underestimate my capacity for good port.”

“And you underestimate my reluctance to have you inherit Silverthorne. Taking Grandmother’s warning to heart, I followed her advice and secured a wife with the utmost dispatch.”

“But it’s so unromantic!” Phyllida wailed.

“Which suits me admirably, for I am the least romantic of men. I find nothing disagreeable about this arrangement. It is honest, practical and expeditious.”

They all looked so dumbfounded, he could not help warming to his subject. “Just think if I’d gone about it the usual way. I would have had to abandon my business concerns for weeks on end to attend a lot of tiresome routs and balls in London. There, I would have stayed up later than is good for me, eaten food that disagreed with me and drank an intemperate quantity of spirits.” He cast a pointed glance at Neville.

"I would have strained to hold my gorge while a pack of silly girls preened for my inspection. I would have pranced through a succession of tedious terpsichorean exercises, whose sole purpose is to provide an immoderate living for mincing dancing masters."

After pausing for a sip of his coffee, Drake continued. "Having fixed on my choice—the least objectionable female desperate enough to consider me for a husband—I would pay the lady my *addresses*, a compound of meaningless pleasantries and insincere flattery. Once my proposal was accepted, I would have commenced negotiations with her father, resulting in a marriage contract, the driest batch of legal quibble ever penned by a lawyer's clerk, a monument to coldblooded self-interest. The whole operation is so exceedingly romantic, it fair takes my breath away!"

Such a long speech all in one go did leave him rather winded. Still, Drake felt a tremendous sense of relief to have had his say on a subject that had long vexed him.

"When is the wedding?" Phyllida finally squeaked.

"The day after tomorrow." Drake beamed as though she had wished him warm congratulations. "I must speak with the vicar and obtain a special license. I trust you will all stay on for the nuptial festivities. We shall need witnesses."

The Dowager Marchioness rose from her place. She had a majestic presence for so small and ancient a person. Grasping her walking stick, she stalked toward the door. "No doubt the funeral meats will coldly furnish forth the wedding table." She quoted from *Hamlet*.

Drake almost grinned. *Touché, Grandmother.*

"I, for one, will not condone this farce with my presence." With that malediction, she marched from the room and quit Silverthorne within the hour.



In a pool of pale autumn sunshine on the stoop of a modest thatched cottage, Lucy Rushton sat reading aloud from Milton's *Comus*. On the bench beside her sat the cottage's tenant, Widow Sowerby, a pair of knitting needles clattering busily in her tiny nimble hands. Never once did she look down at her work, but gazed unseeing on the pastoral beauty of Mayeswater.

For years it had been Lucy's habit to drop by the cottage and read

or talk while Mrs. Sowerby knitted. Preoccupied with her grief for Jeremy and her fears for the future, she had recently neglected her self-imposed duty. Today, in spite of her new misgivings, or perhaps because of them, she'd sought comfort in doing for others.

"Come now, lass, out with it. What's troubling you?" The tempo of Mrs. Sowerby's knitting slowed.

Lucy glanced up from her book. "Troubling me? No. I mean... nothing. Nothing is troubling me. Whatever makes you think that?"

Fortunately, Mrs. Sowerby's cataracts prevented her from noticing the blush that smarted in Lucy's cheeks.

The old woman chuckled. "Just because my eyes don't work no more, doesn't mean I can't see what's plain. I've counted seven times you've sighed since you last turned the page, and four times you've lost your place. Don't try to fool Old Fanny that you haven't got some'ut weighing on your mind."

Lucy sighed for the eighth time. "I might as well tell you. Everyone in Nicholthwait will know by tomorrow night. I'm going to be married."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Sowerby nodded over this information and perhaps the lack of enthusiasm in Lucy's announcement. "Anyone I know?"

Lucy nodded then remembered her friend couldn't see her. "Everyone knows him. I am to marry Viscount Silverthorne."

Mrs. Sowerby's knitting needles froze in mid stitch. "His lordship? This is unexpected news. Most lasses would be singing it to the rooftops—a brilliant match like that."

"It is a great honor." Not to mention a great burden, sharing her life with the man she held responsible for Jeremy's death. If she could have seen any other way to provide decently for her child, she would have taken pleasure in refusing Lord Silverthorne's proposal.

"Oh, aye. A big estate. A title. A large fortune. Most lasses could ask no more from a marriage." The two women, sat silent for a moment. "Then again, you aren't most lasses, Miss Lucy. I think you want more from a husband than his brass or his family name. You'd fancy a man with a ready smile and a way of saying your name that makes your heart beat faster."

Lucy thought of Jeremy Strickland, his eyes as blue as the summer sky reflected in the glassy surface of Mayeswater, his golden hair ruffled by the upland wind. As her eyes began to mist,

she felt a pang of exasperation. She had always been of a sunny, optimistic nature. A sensible person, as the viscount so plainly put it. Lately it took nothing to make her weep. She hated having her emotions so out of control.

"Your description does not sound very much like Viscount Silverthorne, does it?" Lucy hoped Mrs. Sowerby would mistake the break in her voice for a chuckle.

"I suppose not. Nothing glib about his lordship, poor lad."

"Nothing *poor* about his lordship either," Lucy reminded her friend tartly. "They say he has the Midas touch."

Mrs. Sowerby felt at her knitting to find where she'd left off. "As I recall, the golden touch didn't make that Midas fellow any too happy."

"You're hinting at something, so you might as well tell me. Why do you call Lord Silverthorne a *poor lad*?"

Now it was Fanny Sowerby's turn to sigh. "Perhaps you should ask him, my dear. Let's just say he had a childhood I'd not envy any lad."

Something in her tone gave Lucy a pang as she thought of her own idyllic girlhood, full of books and dreams and the small beauties of nature. The only passing shadows on those precious years had been the deaths of an infant brother and sister. Deprived of other children, her parents had lavished all their affection on her.

Just then, she noticed the long shadow cast by Mrs. Sowerby's crab apple tree. Though curious to hear more about Lord Silverthorne's unenviable childhood, she had promised to meet him at the vicarage within the hour.

"I'm afraid I must be getting back home. I'm sorry I was so distracted, and spoiled the reading for you."

"Never mind about that. I'm grateful for the company. Not many lasses would bother with a blind old woman."

"That would be their loss." Lucy stooped to bestow a gentle kiss on the old woman's weathered cheek.

Mrs. Sowerby dropped her knitting and caught Lucy's hand. "I wish you and his lordship every happiness. He's a fine man, for all he don't say much. Once a month, like clockwork, I'll hear him ride up to my gate. Never says a word, just checks to see how I'm getting on. Once he came by when it was raining and my roof leaking like a sieve. The next day a crew shows up with orders to rethatch it."

Lucy could not think what to reply. Mrs. Sowerby's story contradicted her lifelong perception of the stern autocrat.

"He needs a bit of happiness in his life," her friend added. "Deserves it, too, with all he's done for folks hereabouts. If there's a woman can make him happy, I fancy it's you."

"I'll try, Mrs. Sowerby."

The old woman waved Lucy on her way. Then, perhaps thinking her out of earshot, Mrs. Sowerby mused aloud, "You might just be surprised at how happy he can make you, my dear."

Lucy turned away, sighing for the ninth time that afternoon. She doubted it was in the power of any woman to make his lordship happy. And she was certain any chance of her own happiness had died on a Spanish battlefield with Jeremy Strickland.



At a wary distance from the vicarage, Drake sat on his horse trying to screw up his nerve for an interview with Vicar Rushton. He had made his initial marriage offer to Lucy in a momentary surge of moral obligation. Jeremy had used her abominably and Drake felt it his duty to rectify the situation. He had relished breaking the news to his family. Their opposition only strengthened his resolve. During his ride to the vicarage, a host of doubts had begun to assail him.

Could he manage to put up with a wife underfoot all the time? He'd lived a solitary existence, apart from his years in school—years he'd hated. Ragged and bullied by high-born louts with no interests beyond their own pleasure, he'd fought hard for the simple privilege of being left alone. It went against his grain to surrender his hard-won privacy.

He wasn't thinking only of himself, either. What kind of life would it be for Lucy and the child—shut up at Silverthorne with a man temperamentally unsuited to marriage and fatherhood? Desperately as he wanted an heir to displace Neville, he could not consign Jeremy's son to a bleak, joyless childhood like the one he'd suffered.

"It's no good," Drake muttered through clenched teeth.

"Do you not think so?" Lucy Rushton suddenly emerged from a wooded path nearby. "Most people would call this a fine day, after that dreadful storm. Or were you referring to the view?"

Drake looked down the lane to Saint Mawe's vicarage, a cozy

stone house green with ivy and hemmed in by an inviting miscellany of trees and shrubs. Not merely a house, the vicarage looked like a home. The sight of it stirred long-buried wistfulness in Drake Strickland's practical, impervious heart.

"No, indeed." He strove to sound impassive. "The view is very well."

Planting herself squarely in front of his horse, Lucy looked up at him, a challenge glittering incongruously in the depths of her wide, soft eyes. "Then I must assume you are having second thoughts about marrying me?"

He fixed his gaze on a point just above the crest of her bonnet. "By no means, Miss Rushton." Drake surprised himself with the ease by which he delivered this bold-faced falsehood. "I see clearly where my duty lies."

That part was true at least.

"How priggish you sound. As your wife, will I be subjected to daily sermons at the breakfast table?"

Drake felt the sting of her rebuke. This was not the Lucy Rushton who had won his distant regard—the generous, unpretentious girl who read to Widow Sowerby and wandered the countryside with a book tucked under her arm. That winter in Bath of which she boasted must have turned her into one of those tart-tongued brittle creatures he despised.

"I can assure you, madam, I will subject you to as little of my objectionable discourse as appearances permit."

"If that's how you feel, perhaps we should call off this ridiculous charade." With those bold words, her face went white and she swayed as though buffeted by a strong wind. Drake vaulted from his saddle, sending his startled horse skittering sideways. He caught Lucy before she hit the ground.

It took a moment for her to recover, a moment during which Drake found himself torn by conflicting emotions. Part of him protested that it was most indecorous for the scion of Silverthorne to be kneeling in a country lane with a half-conscious woman in his arms. Even if she was his intended bride. Another part felt a passing qualm of guilt that he had subjected Lucy to an unpleasant exchange in her delicate condition. An overwhelming sense of protectiveness conquered all other feelings.

So small and childlike in his arms, she needed him as much as any of his tenants or employees. But she was not a child—she was a

woman. Through the light fabric of her dress, he could feel her delicious feminine curves. This whole arrangement would work better if he did not find her so dangerously attractive. All the same, Lucy and her baby were his responsibility. Though it might prove the most difficult undertaking of his life, he must do right by them.

"Where am I?" Her eyelids fluttered. "What happened?" She struggled to sit up.

"Easy now." Drake gently restrained her. "Do let me know the next time you feel faint. You gave me quite a turn."

She quit trying to get away from him but her whole body stiffened, reluctant to yield. "I seem to make a habit of inconveniencing you, sir. It is a habit I am eager to break, I assure you."

What a prickly temper! Drake frowned. Making any overture toward Lucy Rushton was like trying to engage a hedgehog. Were all expectant mothers like this?

As he slackened his hold, Lucy pulled free from his arms. Jumping to her feet, she slapped the dust from her pale-blue dress. "Forget what I told you last night. I absolve you from any moral obligation to me."

Drake unfolded his tall frame from the crouched posture in which he'd held Lucy. "That is the trouble with moral obligations—one can never quite absolve one's self." He tried to smile, to show he was partly in jest and hopefully to ease some of the tension between them. The muscles of his face didn't seem to understand what he was asking of them. They could only manage a crooked grimace.

"If you wish to reconsider your decision to marry me, that is your right. In fact, I urge you to weigh your options carefully before choosing the course that will best serve you... and your child," he added almost under his breath, in case anyone should be within earshot.

"Options?" She gave a bitter little laugh. "I have no options, Lord Silverthorne, as you are well aware."

"Of course, you do. You must. If you choose not to marry me, I will still provide for you ... both. I'll give you money to go away until the child is born. If you choose not to keep him, I will secure him a good home."

"That is very generous of you."

"It is my duty."

"Ah yes, that irksome word again."

Drake was tempted to launch into a lecture on the importance of ideals like duty and honor, but he restrained himself. "Bear in mind, if you choose to go your own way, I will never be able to acknowledge Jeremy's son as my heir."

"I understand."

"However, it would leave you free to forget the past and one day make a marriage more to your liking."

"I will never forget Jeremy." She declared it as a fundamental truth. "And I will never love any other man. It would be wrong of me to marry a man I could not love."

"What if the man knew you could not love him?" Drake asked quietly. "What if he did not want your love?"

"I suppose..." Lucy looked over at the spire of Saint Mawe's rising from behind the vicarage. "Won't it be a sin to speak marriage vows we have no intention of keeping?"

"I doubt we will be the first couple to do so." Drake scuffed the grass with the toe of his Hessians. "Or the last."

Lucy made no reply. Assuming she must be weighing her options, Drake held himself still and silent. He'd had his say, whether or not she'd listened to him. In the end it all came down to her life and her child's. She must be free to choose, without pressure from him. Yet, as the minutes passed with no sound but the occasional swish of the horse's tail, Drake found himself earnestly hoping Lucy would not change her mind. Perhaps her doubts had tempered his resolve. Or perhaps he wanted a son of Jeremy's to call his own.

Finally she spoke. "Very well, sir. I will marry you."

Drake suddenly realized he'd been holding his breath. "I must speak to your father." He gasped out the words. "Then I must hunt up Squire Lowes and have him issue us a special license. Is tomorrow too soon?"

"For the wedding?" A faint blush mantled Lucy's cheeks. "Considering our reason for marrying—the sooner, the better. First..." She laid a hand on his sleeve. "Can we make a private vow, truthfully, with only God as our witness?"

"What a clever idea." Drake found himself smiling. "Like in business—a prior contract. What did you have in mind?"

Her hand slid slowly down his sleeve. After a moment's hesitation, clasped his hand. "I, Lucy Rushton, promise to raise my child with you as his father. I vow to treat you with the respect due to a husband. I will never burden you with unwanted affection or

be jealous of your interest in other women.”

That summed up the whole situation quite well. Drake cleared his throat. He liked the feel of her hand in his—too much so, perhaps. “I, Drake Strickland, promise to raise your child as my own and treat you with the respect due to a wife. I will never...”

“Burden,” Lucy prompted him.

“Oh, yes. Never burden you with unwanted affection or be jealous of your interest in other men.” For some reason, he had trouble saying that last sentence with conviction.

Lucy let go of his hand. “You needn’t have added that last part. I told you, I will never care for any man but Jeremy.”

“And I have no interest in any woman.” Though he stressed the words most emphatically, Drake could not forget the way she’d felt in his arms. “I believe that sets us even. Now, shall we go break the news to your father?”

Chapter Three

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, her father had taken the news quite well. Lucy reflected as she sat before her dressing table preparing for bed the following night. Although he was the best of men and the kindest of fathers, Vicar Rushton's vague, preoccupied air had deepened over the years since the death of his cheerful, practical wife. Lucy often had the feeling he was only half listening when she spoke to him.

When Lord Silverthorne had formally asked for her hand, her father only shook his head and chuckled, "Well, well, well. Bless my soul!"

Perhaps he thought they'd been courting for ages under his nose, but could not bring himself to admit that he hadn't noticed. He raised no objection when Drake requested a hasty wedding, without banns, blithely agreeing to conduct the ceremony himself.

If their union lasted fifty years, Lucy knew she would always cringe at the thought of her wedding—brief, awkward and decidedly unfestive. As she made her vows to love and honor her husband and forsake all others, her thoughts resonated with earlier promises to do nothing of the kind.

"Will you be needing anything else, your ladyship?" asked the serving girl who had just finished unpacking her trunk.

The silver hairbrush slipped from Lucy's fingers, but made scarcely a sound as it landed on the thick rug. Glancing around her bedchamber in alarm, she wondered if Lady Phyllida had managed to enter without her noticing. Then she realized the girl was addressing her.

"Excuse me, Mary, is it? I'm afraid it will take me some time to become accustomed to my new title. As a matter of fact, plain *ma'am* will be good enough for everyday use."

She retrieved her brush from the floor and checked it over for dents. Such luxuries would take some getting used to.

"Let's see." She surveyed the spacious, elegantly appointed room. The very style of it emphasized that she was far out of her social depth. "The fire has been lit. You've turned down the bed and given it a pass with the warming pan. You've unpacked my clothes. I doubt I shall require anything further tonight."

Back home at the vicarage, she'd have tended to those chores herself. Would she ever get used to ordering a houseful of servants?

The girl curtsied. "Very good, ma'am. I hope you rest well your first night at Silverthorne."

Feeling a blush begin to prickles in her cheeks, Lucy turned back to her dressing table. If young Mary was privy to the gossip buzzing around Nicholthwait about Lord Silverthorne's hasty marriage, she probably doubted her mistress would get any sleep at all on her wedding night.

"Thank you. I'm sure I shall." Lucy tried to sound more certain than she felt.

She heard the door of her bedchamber open and Mary let out a squeal of surprise.

"Excuse me, your lordship," the girl gasped. "I was just about to leave."

Lucy jumped from the stool in front of her dressing table. Her hairbrush tumbled to the floor for the second time.

She heard her bridegroom reply heartily, "How convenient, Mary. I was just on my way in. By the way, tell Talbot I said not to be stingy with the champagne below stairs tonight."

The viscount's long lean frame filled the doorway as he stood there bidding Mary good-night. His dark hair clung to his head in damp curls, leading Lucy to guess he had bathed in the short interval since dinner. Bare feet and firm bare calves showed below the hem of his lordship's olive green dressing gown. Was he wearing anything beneath that dressing gown? Lucy wondered, her throat constricting.

They'd politely danced around the subject in their discussions, but she thought she'd made plain her reluctance to share his lordship's bed. Unwanted affection, indeed. She had loved Jeremy in a way she could never love again. It would be like the worst kind of infidelity to give herself to another man with her beloved barely cold in his grave.

But what if her new husband insisted? She hadn't the strength to resist him physically. To call for help would mean the end of her marriage and the exposure of her secret.

In the few seconds it took for Lord Silverthorne to close the door behind him, Lucy's pulse sped to double time. She took a step back. "Why are you here?"

He swept her a casual glance, a glint of amusement in his dark

eyes. “*Not* to claim my marital rights, if that is what you presume.”

As if to prove his innocent intentions, he sauntered over to the velvet-upholstered chaise before the hearth. “I merely wish to convince our household that I am an attentive husband.”

He lowered himself onto the chaise. “If our marriage is to serve its purpose, everyone must believe I sired your child. I took a rather circuitous route to get here. By my count, five of the servants saw me, as well as Lady Phyllida—an unexpected bonus. With any luck, tales of my ardent regard for you will spread far and wide.”

“I see.” Lucy’s heartbeat slowed a little. Something made her ask, “Was it necessary to arrive in quite this state of undress?”

She could see a wedge of his tanned chest, lightly matted with dark curly hair. How different Drake Strickland was from his brother. Jeremy had been of an elegant, compact build. With his fair complexion and blond hair, he’d made Lucy think of gold and ivory. Spare and rangy, with a fiercely masculine presence, Jeremy’s brother was a creature of bronze and sable.

Now he leaned back on the chaise with an air of polite indifference that enraged her. “Merely useful costuming in our charade of a marriage. I did not want anyone mistaking my intentions.” One dark brow cocked expressively. “Why all this virginal prudery? Surely it’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

The cruelty of his words smote Lucy. Had Lord Silverthorne married her purely for the pleasure of humiliating her?

Passionate rage overcame her. She fairly flew the distance between them, striking his cheek with her hand. “Never speak to me that way again, do you hear?”

She gasped with pain when he clutched her wrist. “Keep your voice down or the whole house will hear you. If you are so afraid of seeing something improper, get into bed and draw the hangings.”

None too gently, he pushed her toward the bed. “I will see myself out after a suitable interval.”

Part of Lucy could not believe she’d dared to strike Viscount Silverthorne, a man she had looked on with awe and more than a little fear for most of her life. Would anything cure her of such reckless impulsiveness? Another part was glad she had slapped him, would slap him again if need be. Insufferable creature!

“I will retire to bed when I am ready, sir. Not when you command.” She sat down on the stool, retrieved her hairbrush and began pulling the bristles through her golden brown curls. Her hand

trembled.

In the looking glass, she saw the viscount shrug his wide shoulders. "I did not command. I merely suggested."

Lucy could see the red mark on his cheek where she had slapped him. Coupled with her other contradictory emotions, she felt a sudden pang of shame. More disturbing still was a bewildering desire to anoint that tiny welt with a kiss.

"I'm sorry I slapped you." She tossed the words carelessly over her shoulder.

He chuckled faintly. "This?" He pointed to his cheek. "I hardly felt it, I assure you." Then his expression turned gravely earnest. "I apologize for my flippant observation. It was uncalled for."

Lucy could not bring herself to utter false assurances of forgiveness. Deliberately, she laid the hairbrush on her dressing table and rose from the stool. "I believe I will retire now. I have not slept well of late."

Lord Silverthorne made no reply but she could feel his eyes upon her. Suddenly, she was conscious of her swollen, tender breasts pushing against the light fabric of her nightgown, and a warm tingling sensation below her womb. What other unsettling symptoms had pregnancy in store for her? Lucy scowled to mask her embarrassment.

Perhaps he marked her expression and thought it was directed at him.

"I'm your ally, not your adversary," he murmured.

"I know." Snuffing her candle, Lucy climbed into bed and drew the covers up to her chin. "It's just that..." She hesitated, unable to put her feelings into benign, neutral words.

He appeared to understand. "...you cannot help thinking how different this night would be if you were Jeremy's bride?"

He had his back turned to her, hunched forward on the chaise. "Perhaps you even wish I were lying in the churchyard in his place?"

Lucy shut her eyes and forced her breath to a slow steady rhythm. If her new husband wondered why she hadn't answered, he might believe she'd fallen asleep.

For several long minutes, she heard nothing but the soft crackle of the fire. Then he spoke again, his voice almost too low for her to hear. "I wouldn't blame you if you did. But the die is cast now. What we cannot change, we must endure."

He sounded so bereft. It suddenly occurred to her that he had lost a beloved brother. At the same time, her pride smarted from his implication that their marriage was an ordeal he must endure. She hated these overwrought, contradictory feelings he provoked in her!



Neville Strickland drained the last drop of port from his glass with sigh of appreciation. When one had to abide a sojourn in the godforsaken wilds of Westmorland, one must take advantage of minor consolations. He fancied a drop more, but the decanter sat on a sideboard clear across the room. Neville could not work up the ambition to go after it. Perhaps a servant would happen by soon to extinguish the dying fire. With a discreet belch, he slouched further in the thickly upholstered armchair and let his heavy eyelids slide shut.

He heard the door open, and footsteps enter the room. Presuming it must be a servant, he roused himself to order another drink. Then he heard the welcome clink of a heavy stopper being lifted from the mouth of the decanter. Say what you liked about old Drake—the man did have his servants well trained.

Neville coaxed one eye open in time to see Phyllida emptying the last drop of port into a tall dipper.

“Greedy little pig,” he grunted.

With a muted shriek, she rose several inches off the floor sending the heavy stopper crashing onto a silver salver. “Good Lord, Neville, you frightened me near to death! I thought you’d gone to bed.”

“Tsk, ts, do you know nothing of logic? There is port in the decanter—at least there *was*—ergo, I must be on hand to drink it. Besides, my bedroom is only two doors down from the bridal chamber. How would I get any sleep with the floorboards creaking under my cousin’s strenuous performance of his conjugal duties?”

Phyllida shot him a withering look. “How crude you are, Neville. You must be drunk.”

“You sound exactly like Grandmama.” He pried his other eye open. “As though people lie or talk nonsense when they’re drunk. In my experience, it is quite the contrary.”

“We all know you have vast experience of being drunk.” Phyllida took a long draft of her port.

“Do I detect a hint of malice? Nurture it, by all means. It might

save your character from being thoroughly insipid.”

She responded in the most provocative way possible—by ignoring him. Pretending she hadn’t heard a word he said, Phyllida seated herself opposite him and took another drink, smacking her lips with enjoyment. Such deliberate aggravation was not to be born.

“Drowning your sorrows?” he sniped. “How long do you suppose it will be before that toothsome little vicar’s daughter drops a dozen Silverthorne brats to supplant young Reggie?”

Phyllida’s eyes bulged to a gratifying degree. If she’d been any closer, Neville was sure she’d have spit on him. “Damn you, Neville! You can sit back and laugh. You’ll never live long enough to see a ha’penny from Silverthorne. But darling Reggie... it is too bad!”

Having goaded her into such an outburst put Neville in a better humor. “There, there, old girl. I share your disappointment. True, I didn’t expect to outlast Drake with his monastic regimen, but I could have lived quite comfortably on my expectations.”

The port in Phyllida’s glass gleamed like liquid rubies in the flickering firelight. She tipped it towards him in a mock toast. “Here’s to the death of expectations.”

“Don’t bury the corpse unless you’re certain it’s past revival,” Neville quipped.

The glass to her lips, Phyllida hesitated. “What drunken nonsense are you talking now?”

He’d managed to stop her from consuming the last of the port. Neville congratulated himself. “What if the bride is barren? She didn’t look robustly healthy to me. What if she miscarries? Stillbirth? Maybe she’ll bear him a daughter?”

“Even a fool like you wouldn’t pin your hopes on that.” Phyllida gave him a sour look. “There hasn’t been a female born in the Silverthorne line since the Norman Conquest. Clarence reminded me of the fact every day while I was carrying Reggie.”

“Must you be so literal?” Neville could smell that last drop of port luring him from the bottom of her glass. “I’m only saying—a lot can go wrong.”

“Yes?” Phyllida stared at him expectantly.

“I’m sure if we put our heads together, we can shipwreck this *honest business arrangement* of Drake’s before it produces any troublesome progeny.”

A hopeful smile spread across her long, pasty face. The port in Neville’s stomach sloshed around menacingly. Gad, the woman

looked positively gruesome when she smiled.

“What must I do?” she asked eagerly.

Neville marshaled his wits for several moments of intense concentration. He hadn’t had an actual plan in mind but surely he could devise one. After all, mischief was on his list of favorite pastimes second only to drinking.

“You must stay on at Silverthorne and ingratiate yourself with the bride.”

Phyllida’s thin upper lip curled in distaste.

“It won’t be so difficult,” said Neville. “You’ve been ingratiating yourself with somebody or other for as long as I’ve known you. And this is in a worthy cause. Sow seeds of discord between the newlyweds and get them to come down to London.”

“London? Whatever for? What is your part in all this?”

“Patience, my dear.” Neville beamed in admiration of his own genius. “While you are chipping away at the foundations of Drake’s marriage like a good little sapper, I shall prepare a marvelous ambush to topple it completely.”

“What sort of ambush?” Phyllida sounded doubtful.

Neville fumbled for his monocle then screwed it up to his eye. He thought it gave his face a look of wisdom and mystery. “Never you mind. Suffice to say, it will send our disaffected young bride bolting for the Continent like a hare with a hound on its tail.”

Phyllida let out a high-pitched giggle that sent shivers down his spine. The port was obviously working on her. “Then if Drake wants to remarry, he’ll have to go through the public disgrace of a divorce. After that, no respectable woman will have him. Oh, Neville, you are too clever!”

He gave a wan smile in return. Her flirtatious glance made him distinctly nervous. He desperately needed another drink. “Shall we toast our alliance?”

“By all means.” Weaving over to Neville’s chair, she dribbled a generous splash of her remaining port into his glass.

“Here’s to the restoration of my expectations and Reggie’s inheritance.” Neville savored the rich body of the port on his tongue for a reverent moment before swallowing.

Phyllida settled herself on the floor beside him and rested her head against his knee. As he recalled a saying about necessity making strange bedfellows, Neville felt the wine in his stomach begin to curdle.



The fire in Lucy's bedchamber had subsided into a handful of glowing embers. By the sound of her deep, even breathing, Drake judged her to be sound asleep at last. He had one final prop to plant in their little charade. With any luck it would fuel all the right sort of rumors, so no one would be suspect when Lucy's baby arrived *early*.

By rights he should have done it before she got into bed but he hadn't been anxious for her to strike him again. Drake reached up and touched his cheek gingerly. Contrary to his earlier protestations, it stung like the very devil. The little spitfire could muster considerable strength when roused.

Not that he could blame her, after his churlish remark. Drake had no idea what had possessed him to say such a thing or why he hadn't warned Lucy he would be coming here tonight. This whole marriage business had propelled him into territory he'd never expected or wanted to tread. Deliberately throwing her off balance helped him to regain some of his own equilibrium.

Drake refused to consider that he might have provoked Lucy in the hope that he would feel her touch, however untender.

From his dressing gown pocket he drew a small flask and uncorked it. Stealthily he approached the bed, reaching under the blankets to deposit the flask's contents. Warm from the heat of his body, she would probably not even notice it. Until tomorrow morning, at which time he hoped she would play along with the ruse. Drake felt his hand brush her flesh.

Before he had an instant to savor the sensation, she sat bolt upright, throwing off the bedclothes and letting out a piercing scream. Dropping the flask, he managed to arrest her hand within inches of his face.

"Once a night is my limit for that kind of abuse, madam."

"You deserve it for frightening me near to death. What are you doing? As if I need ask."

Drake released her hand. He trembled with the effort to suppress his raging urges. He smelled her hair and the faint tantalizing musk of a woman's body roused from sleep. For the first time in his life, Drake felt overwhelmed by powerful impulses beyond his control. It scared the hell out of him.

"Get it through your head, woman, that I am not racked with lust

for the dubious pleasures of your body,” he lied, in what he desperately hoped was a convincing manner.

“Eeew! What have you got all over the sheets and my nightgown?”

“Keep your voice down,” Drake snapped. “It’s a few drops of pig’s blood to convince the servants that *I* have relieved you of your virginity.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Drake rescued the flask and shoved it back in his pocket. “I have learned to pay attention to details.”

Retaining a tenuous grip on his self-control, he backed away from the bed. “The way you have splashed it about will likely cause talk of my enthusiastic performance.”

“You might have done it before I lapsed into a sound sleep.” Lucy pulled the bedclothes up around her.

“Perhaps but I was not eager to feel the sting of your wrath again so soon.” Drake prayed she would attribute the breathlessness of his voice to anger.

“Have you any other nasty surprises in store for me tonight, your lordship?”

“None.” Drake did not trust himself to say more.

“In that case, I will thank you to leave.”

“With pleasure.” He stalked from the room.

In the gallery he could hear the muted sounds of celebration rising from the butler’s pantry. At least someone was getting a bit of pleasure out of his benighted marriage.

Back in his dressing room, Drake found the bathtub still set up and full of water, long since gone cold. Perhaps eager to take part in the festivities below stairs, his valet had neglected to empty it. Letting his dressing gown fall around his ankles, Drake stepped into the narrow tub. As he sat down in the chilly water, he half expected a hissing cloud of steam to rise from his fevered body.

What in heaven’s name had he let himself in for?

Chapter Four

AS THE FOOTMAN set breakfast before her, Lucy smiled wanly. In the weeks since her wedding, she had come to dread the morning meal. In the first place, her persistent nausea was always at its worst before noon.

She glanced down at her plate, mounded with food. Eggs, sausages, hotcakes, kippered herring, broiled veal kidneys in quantities fit to sustain a grown man at field labor. Lucy averted her eyes, before the sight made her ill. What she would have given for a modest saucer of dry toast and a cup of weak tea! Somehow she could not bring herself to dictate special requests to Lord Silverthorne's cook. His cousin kept the kitchen in a constant hop as it was.

"Not indisposed are you, my dear?" asked Lady Phyllida as Lucy toyed with her breakfast.

"Not at all." Lucy shoved a forkful of eggs beneath the veal kidney. "I fear my appetite is not equal to Mrs. Maberley's generous portions."

"Yes." Phyllida laughed. A high-pitched tinkling sound, like a spoon tapping wildly on a wineglass, it often sounded in danger of shattering. "Drake's cook does consider it her mission in life to fatten everyone up."

She cast her cousin a teasing look. "I doubt she'll ever succeed with him."

Drake responded with a derisive grunt as he bolted mouthful after mouthful of his breakfast. Simply watching him made Lucy's gorge rise.

Pushing her plate away, she tried to work up a smile. "You must find the food and the society here very dull after what you've been used to in London, Cousin Phyllida."

From the other end of the breakfast table, she marked the black frown Drake directed her way. No doubt he was angry with her for daring to insinuate that his cousin should leave Silverthorne. Well, too bad about him. If he had told her his marriage proposal included a honeymoon with Lady Phyllida Strickland, she might not have accepted.

"I find nothing wanting in your society, Lucinda dear," Phyllida

replied in her usual patronizing tone. Evidently, she had not recognized the broad hint. "Though I'll own I have been pining for London of late. There are so many merry doings in the autumn, particularly if one is as well connected as Drake."

Lord Silverthorne's frown deepened into an outright scowl. Obviously, he could not abide the notion of his boon companion, Lady Phyllida, departing for the south.

More than once in the past weeks, Lucy had broached the subject.

Phyllida's answer was always the same. "I spoke to Drake about my returning home, but he would not hear of it. He protested that you could not spare me so soon. He is counting on me to help mold you into a proper viscountess. I cannot let him down after all the dear man has done for me since my poor Clarence died."

A spark of resentment deep within Lucy began to smolder. She was heartily sick of constant lectures on aristocratic protocol and proper ladylike deportment. As interpreted by Lord Silverthorne and proclaimed by Lady Phyllida, this consisted of doing a great deal of nothing. At least nothing enjoyable, stimulating or improving. Riding was for hoydens. Reading was for blue stockings. Tramping the countryside was entirely beyond the pale. Small wonder Jeremy had joined the army to escape his overbearing brother.

An awkward, expectant silence in the breakfast room recalled Lucy from her musings. Both Drake and Phyllida were staring at her, waiting. She desperately tried to recall what Phyllida had been talking about. Evidently she'd been asked a question, but she had no idea what.

"Don't you agree, my dear?" Phyllida prompted her.

If they expected her agreement, Lucy was sure it was something she would naturally oppose. Still, she must do her best to conform to their ways. For the sake of her child—the reason she had wed Drake in the first place.

"Of course. I do." She made every effort to sound sincere, but sincere about what?

Lady Phyllida spread her thin lips into a tight smile. "You see, Drake? Your bride is as anxious to get down to London as I am."

Silently Lucy cursed herself. With Drake glowering at her, how could she retract her agreement and explain that she simply hadn't been paying attention?

"What a welcome you would receive, my dear," Phyllida gushed.

"Everyone would be avid to meet the new Lady Silverthorne."

That, thought Lucy, was precisely her fear. She suspected what sort of *welcome* she would receive at the hands of the *ton*. Like some pitiful curiosity at the fairground—a dwarf donkey or a three-legged chicken. The vicar's daughter masquerading as a viscountess. They would watch her like a flock of vultures, ready to rend her to pieces at the first misstep.

Abruptly, Drake rose from his place, hurling down his napkin.

"We have been over this before." He glared at Lucy, his tone icily formal. "I have pressing business matters to attend. I've recently bought a mining operation at High Head. The place has been losing money for years, and lately I've heard tell of dangerous conditions. I need to get to the bottom of the trouble and set things to—"

"I fear Neville is right about you, Drake." Phyllida looked surprised to hear herself agreeing with Neville about anything. "You are overburdened with a sense of *noblesse oblige*. Do you mean to say this great hole in the ground is of more importance than your own wife?"

"Enough!" Though Phyllida had been speaking, Drake addressed himself to Lucy with cold loathing in his eyes. "I have business to attend, if you will excuse me. I may not be back in time for dinner this evening."

Though she struggled to suppress them, tears welled in Lucy's eyes. She had born his grim censure for the past four weeks. Together with Phyllida's constant carping and her own unrelenting biliousness, she could bear it no longer.

The sight of her distress did nothing to soften her austere, exacting husband. With a final look of glacial disdain, he strode from the breakfast room.

"My poor Lucinda." Phyllida caught her hand.

For an instant Lucy regretted her resentment of Drake's cousin. Despite her nagging and condescending airs at least Phyllida tried to be sympathetic.

"Don't worry your head about it. I'll go talk to Drake." She set off after him.



Drake had not gone far when Phyllida caught up with him. "Drake Strickland, how could you? We all know you married Lucy for one

reason only, but must you flaunt the fact by paying her so little mind? Could you not see how crushed she was by your refusal to take her to London?"

Trying manfully to control his temper, Drake could feel his back teeth grinding. The situation was intolerable. Other men had wives who nagged them. *His* wife enlisted an expert to nag him on her behalf.

"Lucy and I are staying at Silverthorne. If you are so anxious to get home, by all means go." Drake reminded himself that by *home*, he meant his own town house in London. He had put the place at her disposal after the death of his cousin Clarence.

Phyllida sighed. "Much as I would love to get back to London, I know my duty. Lucy is so very attached to me. She depends on me to steer her through these early days in her new position. I could not think of deserting the poor child."

"My wife is not a child." She was very much a woman, and Drake wished to heaven he could ignore the fact. "Sooner or later she must learn to manage on her own."

Phyllida blinked her eyes in a look of mild reproof. "Only yesterday I mentioned to her how I should like to return south before the snow flies. If you could have seen the tears in her eyes as she pleaded with me to stay another fortnight, you would not be so unsympathetic."

Another fortnight in the company of Phyllida and her odious little Reggie? Drake wondered how he would bear it. Mentally he added another item to his tally of grievances against his wife.

"Of course Lucy couldn't object to my leaving if the two of you came along with us for a visit. That is why I broached the subject. Didn't you hear how eagerly she greeted the idea? She has never been there, you know, but I can tell how she longs for it. She gets such a sweet wistful look when she talks about spending last winter with her aunt in Bath. Why, only the other day she said to me, 'Phyllida, do you suppose Drake is too ashamed to take me out in society?'"

To cover his acute discomfort, Drake made a few derisive noises deep in his throat. Ashamed? What nonsense!

"It quite broke my heart to hear her," continued Phyllida. "I hastened to assure her that nothing could be further from the truth. However, when she learns of your latest answer on the subject, I fear she will take the news very hard."

Drake suspected his cousin Clarence might have been glad to die and escape this woman's fretting and badgering. "Nonetheless, I have made my decision."

Shaking her head dolorously as she started back for the breakfast room, Phyllida cast him a reproachful look. Drake chose to ignore it. Beneath the frigid surface of his composure, resentment seethed. If Lucy had cause to complain of their marriage, why did she not speak to him directly, instead of setting her bosom companion, Phyllida, to hound him?

He gained the entry hall with mixture of relief and exasperation. Relieved to be making his escape for another day. Exasperated at how his wife and her crony had made him a fugitive from his own home.

"Begging your pardon, sir."

Drake spun around to find the cook waiting on him, neat as a pin in her starched apron and cap, with every grey hair smoothed into place. A tiny scrap of a woman, somewhat plump from sampling her own good cooking, she'd been the only motherly influence in his life.

He smiled in spite of himself. "I am at your service, Mrs. Maberley. What can I do for you this morning?"

"Well, your lordship." She addressed Drake's knees, a purplish flush creeping up above her high collar. "I'd be most obliged if you'd start interviewing for a new cook."

Drake didn't think he'd heard right. "Surely you're not giving notice, Mrs. Maberley." The very idea! "Did I forget to mention how much I enjoyed your seedcake the other night?"

The cook shifted from one foot to another. "Very kind of you to say so, I'm sure, milord. I am giving notice, as soon as you can find a replacement."

"I couldn't possibly replace you, Mrs. Maberley. At best I'd get someone to prepare our meals. You have been the heart of Silverthorne for as long as I recall. How often I used to steal down the back stairs when I was a little fellow, to find a bit of seedcake or gingerbread for bedtime tuck."

A nostalgic smile momentarily lit Mrs. Maberley's motherly features. "You were such a spindly little shaver in them days, Master Drake. A body couldn't help wanting to fatten you up. You still want filling out," she added tartly.

"So you won't desert me... I mean *us*." He had a devil of a time

over that collective pronoun, Drake mused. Try as he might, he could not think of himself as part of a couple.

Mrs. Maberley shook her head. "It's been many a year since you were a lad scavenging for a bite at bedtime, Master Drake. And likely you thought me an old woman back then..."

If only Jeremy was here, Drake thought. His charming half-brother had always known exactly what people wanted to hear. What's more, he'd been able to deliver it with an air of candid charm that ensured he always got his way. Though a trenchant observation or a mordant jest slipped easily enough from his own tongue, Drake had never mastered the skill of putting his deepest feelings into words.

"Never," he protested. "Well, perhaps a little..."

Mrs. Maberley nodded knowingly. "I am getting on in years. Thanks to the handsome wages you pay me, I've been able to save a little nest egg to retire on. You need some fresh blood around Silverthorne, to do everything up proper for your new missus."

Suddenly Drake understood. "Has my wife been giving you any trouble, Mrs. Maberley? Is that why you want to leave?"

"Oh no, your lordship, not at all. Her ladyship's a lovely girl."

"But...?" Drake prompted. He could sense it coming. What airs was the vicar's daughter giving herself as mistress of Silverthorne?

The cook looked torn between a desire to avoid trouble and a need to voice long-stifled complaints. "It's just that her ladyship isn't partial to my cooking. Her plate always comes back to the kitchen hardly touched."

Drake opened his mouth to explain Lucy's lack of appetite. Then he shut it again. Was it too early for the symptoms of pregnancy to be appearing if Lucy had conceived on their wedding night, as they wanted everyone to believe? If it had been a case of equine gestation, he would have known instantly.

"I promise I will speak to her ladyship, Mrs. Maberley. I doubt she meant any insult. Do say you'll stay on. If you feel the workload is becoming too much, I'll engage you a battalion of scullery maids."

"It's not just her ladyship, milord. There's Lady Phyllida and Master Reginald. Always pestering me for special dishes and trays sent up to her room. Complains the boy won't eat what I give him. Then I catch the young rascal stealing my fresh jam buns out of the pantry. I wouldn't mind it if he ate his supper like a good boy. *He*

don't need fattening up, I can tell you."

"They won't be staying much longer," Drake assured her. One way or the other, he'd have them out by the end of the week. If his wife couldn't manage without her friend, she could go off to London with them and good riddance.

"I'm sure I don't *want* to leave if I don't have to."

"And I... that is, we... don't want you to go. So it's all settled. If anyone gives you trouble, do as you like with them. Tell Lady Phyllida to go whistle for her tray. Give Reggie a good smack if you catch him in the pantry. I'll stand behind you completely." Drake hoped his cook would mortally offend Phyllida into leaving Silverthorne at once.

The pedestal clock in the entry hall chimed nine. Drake bowed to Mrs. Maberley. "If you will excuse me, I must be off now. Thank you for bringing these matters to my attention."

Minutes later as he rode away from Silverthorne, Drake added yet another black mark against his wife to the rapidly growing list.



"That man!" Phyllida chuckled as she returned to the breakfast room. "You mustn't mind him, Lucinda. He's been too long a bachelor—that's his trouble. I can tell what you are thinking, my dear, but it simply isn't true. Drake is not the least bit ashamed of you. You mustn't on any account think that is why he refuses to take you to London. What matter your humble origins or your rustic manners? Your beauty and sweetness of temper more than compensate for those deficiencies."

Ashamed of her? Lucy felt the blood drain from her face, leaving behind a frigid mask. For weeks now she had tried to follow Lady Phyllida's advice and become the kind of wife a man in his position needed. For her baby's sake, she owed Lord Silverthorne that much. Had he offered a word of encouragement? Recognized and applauded her efforts?

Hardly. The more strenuously she tried, the more quietly antagonistic he became. She had grown to detest his frosty politeness and his look of silent censure. Now to discover he was ashamed of her. If her husband had returned to the breakfast room at that moment, Lucy would have throttled him!

If she stayed a moment longer, she feared she might throttle Lady

Phyllida in her cousin's place.

"Please excuse me." She pushed away from the table. "I feel the urgent need of fresh air. I believe I will take a walk."

"Not to visit those common people in the village, I hope," Phyllida cautioned. "What would the viscount think of his wife consorting with those so far below her new station?"

Of all the strictures imposed by her new position, this rankled Lucy the worst. She longed to stop by Mrs. Sowerby's cottage for a talk or drop in for tea at the vicarage. Apart from Sunday matins she'd scarcely seen her father since her marriage. She'd invited him to Silverthorne of course, but Phyllida made them both feel so ill at ease. In recent weeks, he'd begun to turn down her invitations on various pretexts. Perhaps it was just as well, thought Lucy. Though she didn't want her father to worry on her account, she was hard-pressed to keep up the pretense that all was well in her new life.

"I don't plan on going into Nicholthwait." Lucy strained keep her tone civil. "I only mean to stroll in the garden and sit under the great elm."

Phyllida squinted in the direction of the windows. "The weather does look unusually clement. Perhaps I shall join you in the garden this morning. Get a taste of this fresh air and see if I can fathom why you and Drake are so addicted to it."

Lucy heard no more, for she was out the door before Lady Phyllida finished speaking.

Returning to her bedchamber to fetch a shawl, she deliberately took a roundabout route. In the main gallery of the east wing, she paused for a moment beneath a portrait of Jeremy Strickland, aged sixteen. Even then, his features had shown the promise of manly beauty. The artist had managed to capture that engaging light in his eyes. Lucy almost fancied he was looking out at her from the painting, knowing she was carrying his child, understanding how much she still loved him.

How hopeless her love had seemed when he was a poised and handsome young man of sixteen and she, a timid, graceless adolescent adoring him from a worshipful distance. She had lived for his school holidays, gazing raptly at him in church every Sunday morning, prowling the fringes of the estate praying for a glimpse of him. Year after year.

Then one day, long after she'd stopped hoping for it, the miracle had happened. She had not even heard he was home. Hurrying back

to the vicarage from picking wildflowers, she'd collided with Captain Strickland on a wooded path by the lake. He'd called her by name and for the first time he had truly looked at her.

"There you are, ma'am." The housemaid's voice shattered Lucy's bittersweet reverie. "Lady Phyllida's been looking for you."

Lucy touched a finger to her lips. "You haven't seen hide nor hair of me, Mary. Is that clear?"

The girl raised her eyebrows knowingly. "Odd. Could've sworn I saw her ladyship. Must've been a shadow." She glanced up at the portrait of Jeremy. "What an awful shame about poor Captain Strickland. We so miss his high spirits around here."

Feeling her eyes begin to sting in an ominous fashion, Lucy turned away without another word. She now understood why Jeremy had chafed under the tyranny of his formidable brother. She must stand up to this unfeeling despot and she must do it now. Otherwise she and her child might never know a moment's happiness.

Chapter Five

H E HAD NOT been at High Head colliery for more than half an hour, when Drake scented something foul in the wind. And it was not the miners. Oh, they weren't a prepossessing lot by any means—shifty and evasive in answering his questions. Irritatingly servile, yet obviously mistrustful of his intentions as the new owner.

Only the mine's overseer, an affable fellow named Janus Crook, appeared ready to be the least bit forthcoming.

"This here could be a real going concern, your lordship, if you don't mind my saying so. That's a good vein we've tapped."

Drake cocked an eyebrow. "The previous owners assured me of that as well, Mr. Crook. However, through my inquiries I've discovered High Head has been steadily losing money for some years. How do you account for that?"

The overseer's rather prominent ears turned scarlet. "Not my place to criticize my betters, your lordship, seeing as the previous owner was gentlemen like yourself."

"Save your breath, man." Drake did not try to hide his exasperation. He knew what the fellow was hinting at for he'd seen it often enough in his other business ventures. Scions of indebted noble houses trying to raise some capital by dabbling in business ventures they knew nothing about. Arrogantly refusing to take the advice of smart young chaps like Janus Crook, whom they considered their social inferiors. Drake didn't care a tinker's cuss for those pompous fools. What he regretted was the damage done to the local people.

"You'll soon discover I run a much tighter ship, Mr. Crook. I won't tolerate waste or corruption. I demand loyalty and an honest day's work, but I believe in paying for it."

Grinning with indulgent tolerance at his new employer, the overseer shook his head. "A noble goal, your lordship. If you don't mind my saying so, I think you're wasting your concern on these louts."

He jerked his head toward the office window and the miners milling about outside. "As shiftless and surly a lot as you'd ever want to meet. They stole the last owner blind. If you ask me, I'd say sack the lot and bring in a new crew."

Drake could scarcely believe what he was hearing. "Where can these people go if we dismiss them?"

"Not your look-out, is it governor? Leeds. Sheffield. Who cares, eh? As long as they're not being a drain on your operation."

Drake drew himself up to his full impressive height. "Much as I appreciate your advice, Mr. Crook, that is not how I do business. My policy is to keep Westmorland folk at home. Pay a man a fair wage, treat him with respect, and he will be your ally in the quest for success. Another point on which I will not compromise is safety. I've heard rumors of dangerous conditions at High Head."

The overseer looked genuinely shocked. "Can't think who'd be spreading malicious lies like that, your lordship. High Head colliery is as safe as any in Britain."

That was no great boast, Drake mused. He'd heard of atrocities in the Welsh mines that made his hair stand on end. "If it's all the same to you, Mr. Crook, I will judge that for myself."

"As you wish, your lordship. Always at your service."

To his surprise, Drake found little fault with the operation. Some of the equipment was not in top repair, but otherwise he was fairly well pleased at the end of his tour. The morose silence of the miners made him uneasy, though. They went about their work listlessly, almost tentatively, as though used to getting away with doing as little as possible. Perhaps Janus Crook was right about the people of High Head after all.

Late in the afternoon, following a brief inspection of the accounts, Drake took his leave, promising to return for a more thorough scrutiny later in the week. He rode back to Nicholthwait, preoccupied with plans for putting the colliery on a more profitable footing. Remembering his intention not to return to Silverthorne for dinner, he stopped to eat at a small inn outside Eastmere.

As he ate Drake contemplated his mistake in marrying Lucy Rushton. Alienating his servants, clinging to the detestable Phyllida, angling for an excursion to London—she was no longer the sweet, unspoiled creature he'd once thought her. Perhaps she never had been. With a shudder of distaste, Drake ordered another tankard of ale.

What he resented most was the mysterious, potent power she exerted over him. Though he'd tried to shut her out during the past weeks, Lucy drew his eyes at every opportunity, intruded upon his private thoughts and boldly invaded his dreams. How dare she hold

his body and his emotions in such thrall when she obviously held his most cherished ideals in contempt!

Darkness had fallen by the time Drake reached Nicholthwait. He rode silently through the village, aware of hearth light shining through chinks in the window shutters, hearing snippets of talk and laughter. Thinking of what awaited him back at Silverthorne manor, his hackles rose in a chill of aversion.



Absently drawing a brush through her hair Lucy sat by her bedroom window, watching the well-lit lane for some sign of her husband's return. After pondering her choices all day, she had finally come to a decision. She would take her trip to London, like a dose of castor oil—unpleasant but necessary to purge Lady Phyllida from Silverthorne.

All day she had been nerving herself to broach the subject with Drake. The wait for his return from High Head was becoming intolerable. Just as Lucy was beginning to fear the brush had rubbed her scalp raw, she caught a glimpse of a tall erect figure riding up the lane.

As Drake passed beneath her window, illuminated by the bright lamps of the main entry, she saw his mouth grimly set. Somehow he looked weary, too... and sad. Perhaps a few weeks' diversion in London would be just the tonic for him, an opportunity to forget about business and indulge in a little enjoyment for a change.

As she waited by her door, held open a crack, listening for the sound of Drake's brisk step, Lucy rehearsed her speech. Her nerves had worked themselves up to a tense pitch by the time she finally heard him approaching.

"Your lordship..." She swung the door wide to block his path but affected mild surprise at seeing him. "I am pleased to see you home at last. I was hoping to have a word with you."

He said nothing, but swept her with a scornful glance.

Lucy wondered if she had neglected something in her evening toilette. "Will you... that is... won't you come in?"

She stepped back into the room. Drake followed her just past the threshold. He drew the door closed behind him though not tightly enough to latch.

"Do I take it this is an official invitation into your bedchamber,

madam?" he asked coolly. "To what do I owe this unexpected honor?"

His tone stung Lucy like blast of winter wind. Just once she wanted to put him on the defensive. "I thought it wise, your lordship. I fear your servants might grow suspicious of an infant bred from a single act."

He shrugged. "I have your word that my brother got you with child on the first try."

Lucy flinched as though he had struck her.

"Was there anything else you required of me?"

She grasped for one of her rehearsed speeches but her mind was suddenly a blank. "London," she blurted out. "It would do us both a power of good to make the journey to London."

A spark of antagonism blazed in the depths of Drake's dark eyes.

"London again?" he growled. "I grow tired of hearing about your longing for London. I have urgent business that keeps me here. Let me hear no more talk of London."

"So, it is true. You are too ashamed of your wife to introduce her into society."

Drake's lip curled in disdain. "You can quit this pity mongering. I assure you my heart is quite impervious."

His words and his manner fanned a month's worth of smoldering resentment in Lucy. It flared into a blistering blaze. "If you have a heart, Drake Strickland, I do not doubt it is impervious to any tender emotion."

She trembled in an effort to contain the power of her rage. "I don't care if you are ashamed of me. I am who I am, and I will not change—least of all for you."

"When have I ever asked you to change?" In response to the heat of her anger, Drake became colder and more restrained. His voice sounded menacingly quiet, his words clipped and precise.

There he stood as hard and uncaring as an effigy of cold black marble. It goaded Lucy beyond bearing that he should provoke her to such a pitch of turbulent rage, while remaining so aloof and impregnable himself. She longed to throw herself at him, pounding on his chest until she battered him into some answering flicker of feeling.

"You needn't condescend to ask." Her voice sounded ragged and breathless. "You have others to issue your edicts. Besides, your lordship underestimates what he can convey with a haughty look. I

know just what you would have me become.”

“If you are so aware of my displeasure I wonder that you make no effort to win my approval.” All that displeasure and more was etched plainly on his arrogant features.

“No effort!” Lucy fairly shrieked. “You have no idea of the effort I have made, without receiving the least sign of encouragement or appreciation from you.”

Drake’s black brows knit in a frown of cold vexation. He folded his arms across his chest. “If you think I mean to encourage your recent behavior, madam, you are mistaken.”

Years of ingrained propriety fell before Lucy’s consuming anger. “Then to hell with you! I don’t care twopence what you think of me.” She snapped her fingers beneath his nose.

His hand shot up, gripping her wrist in a hold that brought tears of pain and rage to her eyes.

“Remember your promise, my dear,” he urged her in a grating whisper. “You vowed to treat me with the respect and honor due a husband.”

A thrill of victory blossomed momentarily in Lucy’s heart. As he held her arm, she could feel answering waves of wrath pulse through Drake. His nostrils flared as his breath came fast and shallow. He wanted to toss her over his knee and thrash her within an inch of her life, and she had the satisfaction of knowing it. She’d lured him out of the fastness of his granite citadel into open combat.

“For a time, I thought I might have been mistaken about your character, Viscount Silverthorne.” She willed her voice not to break. “Now I see I was right in the first place.”

Abruptly, he loosed her wrist, casting it from him as if it were some loathsome form of reptile life. “I thought I knew your true character,” he replied stonily, retreating once again into his icy fortress. “Now I see I was entirely deceived.”

Beneath his scornful words, she heard a note of genuine disillusionment. Why should she care for the opinion of this insufferable tyrant? Though Lucy insisted to herself that she cared not one whit, she knew in her heart that she did want Drake’s approval. What sort of life stretched before her if she did not have his regard at least? What sort of family life could she hope to make for her child? She turned away, determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

"You drove Jeremy to his death trying to escape your domination." She hurled the indictment over her shoulder. "I serve you notice here and now that I will not allow you to grind me or my child beneath your heel."

She heard a sharp hiss of indrawn breath. Her missile must have found its mark. After a moment's silence Drake spoke again. His tone betrayed no sign that she'd inflicted a wound.

"Much as I would like to stay and continue this charming tête-à-tête," he mocked her with biting sarcasm, "I have had a busy day and I expect to have several more before the week is out. If you will excuse me, madam, I believe I will retire for the night."

Not trusting herself to speak or to face him, Lucy waved her hand in what she hoped he would take for a gesture of indifferent dismissal. She held herself in expectant stillness waiting for the sound of his departure.

"Do give me some warning before you next invite me to your boudoir." Drake casually leveled his parting shot. "I will take the precaution of coming armed."

Lucy heard her bedroom door close with quiet finality. Only when Drake's footsteps had died away in the distance did she bolt for her bed. There she pummeled her innocent pillow into a tattered heap of cotton and feathers.

Chapter Six

IT TOOK LUCY several hours to calm herself sufficiently to get to sleep. Tossing and turning in her bed, she thought of all the scathing remarks she wished she'd hurled at Drake. Worst of all, she knew with galling certainty that he had marched off to his own bed for a peaceful, untroubled night.

She woke late the next morning, having scarcely slept at all. In a particularly rebellious mood, she dressed in a serviceable old gown she'd brought to Silverthorne from the vicarage. Phyllida or no Phyllida, she intended to pay some calls on her friends in Nicholthwait today.

Descending the stairs, she looked forward to a quiet breakfast without the company of her husband and his cousin.

She nodded to the butler. "Mr. Talbot, since I've come late to breakfast, tell Mrs. Maberley not to bother with a full meal for me. Tea and bread will be quite sufficient."

"Are you certain, ma'am? It would be no trouble..."

"Quite certain, Mr. Talbot. In fact you may tell Mrs. Maberley that from now on I will take tea and bread for my breakfast."

As the butler set off for the kitchen, Lucy let out a long, shaky breath. There, that hadn't been so difficult. Her stomach felt less upset already.

Slipping into the quiet breakfast room, she startled by the sight of Drake sitting at the head of the table. He acknowledged her with a cool nod. She replied in kind. For a wild instant, Lucy found herself wishing Phyllida had been there to ease the tension with her prattle.

As she took her seat, she noticed the rise and fall of Drake's fork picking up tempo. He consumed his breakfast as rapidly as possible. Evidently, he was as eager to get away from her as she was to see him go. With a flush of vindictive satisfaction, Lucy noted the dark shadows beneath his eyes. Perhaps he hadn't slept as soundly as she'd assumed.

She was beginning to fidget and wonder how soon Talbot would bring her tea, when she heard the muted sounds of a commotion in the entry. Drake must have heard it, too, for he looked toward the door. At first Lucy could make nothing of the words, except their

tone of anger and urgency. Then, quite clearly, she heard *mine* and *cave-in*. Dropping his cutlery in mid-bite, Drake rose from his chair and strode out of the room. Lucy followed.

In the entry hall stood Mr. Talbot, Silverthorne's normally phlegmatic butler, engaged in a shouting match with a stranger—by far the dirtiest individual Lucy had ever seen. Spying Drake, he tried to shoulder his way past Talbot.

When Drake approached, the stranger lunged forward, clutching the lapels of his coat. "Cave-in at High Head, sir! A whole shift of men trapped!"

Drake responded immediately. Grabbing the stranger by the arm he propelled him out the door. Lucy presumed they were headed for the stables. As she stood there, momentarily stunned by the turn of events, Talbot brushed off his coat where the stranger had laid hands on it.

"Why did you not show the man in at once, Mr. Talbot?"

"As I informed the caller, ma'am," he thrust back his shoulders and drew himself into a severely straight posture, "a few minutes either way was not going to matter. His lordship slept poorly last night and I felt he should be able to enjoy his breakfast in peace."

"His lordship slept poorly?" Lucy savored the taste of those words. Innocently, she asked, "What was the trouble?"

"His lordship did not choose to confide that information."

Hearing the clatter of hooves in the forecourt, Lucy looked outside just in time to see Drake and the messenger riding off at a full gallop. With a pang of shame, she remembered the cave-in at High Head, the trapped miners and their families. She had no business gloating over a minor victory in her running battle with Drake when there might be something she could do to help.

Immediately an idea came to her. It would mean issuing orders to the Silverthorne servants—particularly the formidable Mr. Talbot and the cook, who wore a constant frown of disapproval. In the end she would likely receive a stern lecture from Drake as well, for breaking any number of edicts on the proper conduct of a viscountess.

Both considerations gave her pause. Life at Silverthorne had been intolerable enough for the past month. Did she need to make it worse? On the other hand, who else had the means and the authority to bring relief to the people of High Head?

Swallowing a lump in her throat and wiping moist palms on the

skirt of her gown, Lucy gave her first true order as mistress of Silverthorne. "Mr. Talbot, kindly inform the hostlers I need a sturdy wagon and a good strong team. Have them harness up the little tilbury as well. In the meantime, I want the household staff to round up supplies for me."

"Supplies, ma'am?" The butler looked quite bewildered.

"Lord Silverthorne has set off for High Head and I mean to follow. I shall need blankets, cotton for bandages. Food, of course. I'll speak to Mrs. Maberley about that. Well, Mr. Talbot, don't just stand there. We have work to do."

"Yes, ma'am." The butler acknowledged her with a twitch of his head. Then he blew a shrill whistle which brought several young footmen scurrying.

For the next hour the elegant halls of Silverthorne echoed with footsteps proceeding far more quickly than their usual sedate pace. From her headquarters in the front entry hall, Lucy marshaled her supplies, diverted only briefly to don her gloves, her bonnet and a thick shawl. The wagon appeared without delay and was soon piled high with commandeered food and other supplies.

"One more thing, Mr. Talbot." Lucy stood on the tips of her toes and whispered in his ear.

The butler's face went white. "B-b-but your l-l-ladyship," he sputtered. "That's the last of his lordship's French stock. Lord knows when we shall see decent brandy again as long as Boney's got a stranglehold on the Continent."

Lucy put her hands on her hips. "I have every confidence in General Wellington, Mr. Talbot. Now, go and get me that brandy. I will take full responsibility for disposing of it."

Talbot trudged away with the air of a man ordered to present his children for ritual sacrifice. Lucy turned her attention back to the wagon.

"What a fine idea," she commended the two footmen who covered her load with a heavy sheet of canvas.

When she ordered the driver off the tilbury gig, the man gave her a puzzled look. "Who's to drive you, ma'am?"

"I shall drive myself, of course." Lucy tried her best to look confident—and taller. "I'm very good with horses."

"I must protest, ma'am." Mr. Talbot reappeared with a small wooden crate lovingly cradled in his arms. "That is no journey for a lady to make by herself. I feel certain his lordship would not

approve.”

Lucy felt equally certain but she had no intention of letting that stop her. There were people in trouble who needed her help. For the first time in weeks, she felt strong, confident and alive. “As you see, Mr. Talbot, his lordship is not on hand to consult.”

The butler began to sputter again. Lucy relieved him of the crate of brandy, tucking it under the driver’s seat of the gig. “If it will put your mind at rest, Talbot, I do not intend to go all the way to High Head by myself.”

The butler’s craggy features betrayed visible relief.

“No indeed.” Lucy accepted a hand up into driver’s seat. “I will stay close to the supply wagon at all times. I also mean to stop at the vicarage and enlist my father to accompany me.”

“What is all this to-do?” Phyllida emerged from the entry hall. “Where is Viscount Silverthorne? Will someone kindly tell me what is going on?” She stared at the supply wagon and Lucy’s gig, as though the whole scene were some kind of apparition.

Talbot briefly explained the situation.

“This is ridiculous! Lucinda, come down at once. Rest assured I would never have let you get this far if I had known what was going on. I was in the nursery with Reggie. The poor child has suffered a dreadful bilious attack.”

Undoubtedly brought on by eating too many stolen sweet buns, Lucy thought. She wished Phyllida would be quiet for a minute so she could get a word in.

“I finally got him settled,” Phyllida continued with no foreseeable break, “only to discover that in my absence Silverthorne has been turned upside down and the lady of the house is preparing to drive off to some dreadful mine. Really, my dear, you must remember your new station. It is out of the question for a viscountess to undertake such a madcap escapade. Whatever will his lordship say when he finds out?”

She finally paused for breath.

“He can say what he likes,” replied Lucy. “I am going and that’s all there is to it. As you are so fond of reminding me, Phyllida, I am *Lady Silverthorne*, now. Short of throwing yourself in front of my horse, there isn’t much you can do to stop me.”

With that Lucy twitched the reins against the rump of the bay gelding, which set off smartly. Unfortunately, Lady Phyllida did not accept the invitation to hurl herself into its path.



It was well into the afternoon by the time Lucy and her father reached High Head. The wind felt chillier at this altitude than down in the valley around Mayeswater. It had blown in a bank of fat, dark-bottomed clouds that were beginning to spit heavy drops of rain.

A crowd had collected some distance from the mouth of the mine—a shaft cut horizontally into the side of a steep hill, now choked with fallen earth and rock. Lucy could see a large number of boys running back and forth with barrows and handcarts, tipping what debris the digging crews had unearthed. The rescuers must have made a good start, for they had managed to tunnel their way out of sight.

“Excuse me,” Lucy called to a man on the fringe of the crowd. It was obvious why he had not joined in the rescue effort, for one of his shirt sleeves hung empty below the elbow. “I have food and supplies. Is there anywhere I can set up to get these people out of the rain?”

“Aye, miss. There’s the overseer’s office. Though I don’t imagine he’d care for folks crowding in there.”

“Where is he? I shall ask him myself.”

An old man in the crowd cackled, “We ain’t seen aught of Mr. Crook since last night. Skinned out for parts unknown if you ask me. Didn’t want the new owner breathing down his neck. Still, you’d best not take over his office without permission, lass.”

“The *lass* is Lady Silverthorne,” barked the driver of the supply wagon. “Her husband owns this mine.”

The old man exchanged a glance with the one-armed fellow. He shrugged. “If you’re t’new owner’s wife, lass, I reckon you can go wherever you please. Can we show you the way and give you a hand getting set up?”

“By all means. Thank you.” Lucy uttered a silent prayer that she would not find Drake in possession of the overseer’s office. He would surely pack her off back to Silverthorne before she had a chance to climb down from the gig.

In fact, the building was eerily empty. Lucy could see her breath in the still, cold air. The five-room dwelling, which evidently served as both office headquarters and residence for the overseer, had certainly been vacant all day.

“Let’s get some fires going.” Lucy issued her first order. “This being a colliery, we should have no shortage of fuel.”

Her two drafted helpers looked at each other for a moment, then turned on Lucy with eager smiles. “Right, ma’am. Fires. Unload the wagon. See to the horses.”

“A commendable set of priorities, gentlemen. I will be along to help you in few minutes.” Lucy turned to her father. “I need you to go out to the crowd and bring back anyone who has relatives trapped in the mine. It will be a while before I can do much for them, but you can be of help immediately. Besides, filling this building with bodies might help to warm it up.”

“What’s that you say, my dear? Oh, the people outside.” Vicar Rushton looked altogether confounded by the flood tide of events that had overtaken him. “We must get them out of the weather, by all means.”

At the door he hesitated, looking back at Lucy. “Do you think I’ll be able to make myself heard over that wind?”

Lucy dropped a fond kiss on her father’s cheek. His fluffy white side-whiskers tickled her nose. “Use your lectionary delivery.”

“Of course.” The vicar’s ruddy countenance blossomed with a confident smile. “Reading from the gospel according to St. John...,” he declared in tones of clerical resonance.

“That’s the way.” Lucy patted his shoulder. “Now go round them up. If they’re nervous about coming, tell them it’s all been approved by the new owner.”

“Has it, indeed?” Vicar Rushton gave Lucy a shrewd questioning look. Perhaps he understood more of what was going on around him than he cared to let on.

Lucy held her head high. “Once his lordship hears what we are doing, I believe he will endorse the idea.” Everything but her own part in it, she silently reminded herself.

The vicar nodded. His long fringe of white hair danced wildly around his face. “I expect you’re right. I’ve known few men in his position with so genuine a concern for the working people.”

Lucy scarcely looked up from *her* work for the next several hours. When she finally had a moment to do so, she glanced around the room with a flush of pride and satisfaction. Kettles of coffee, tea and soup steamed away on the hob of every hearth. Relatives of the trapped miners sat huddled in small groups, talking amongst themselves in tones of quiet encouragement. A short time ago she

had dispatched baskets of cake and sandwiches to the rescue crew, along with three bottles of Drake's French brandy. Lucy hoped the men she had sent with those provisions would return soon with heartening news of the rescue effort.

As she wended her way through the crowded building with a fresh tray of sandwiches, Lucy noticed one young woman sitting off by herself. Her thin fingers clenched around a mug, the woman stared listlessly out the window. Even her high-waisted dress did not conceal her bulging belly. Lucy's heart immediately went out to her.

Sinking down onto a stool beside the woman, she held out her tray. "Would you care for a sandwich? They aren't very dainty I'm afraid, but they're good and nourishing. You'll need to keep your strength up."

The woman set her cup down on the wide window ledge beside her. She took a sandwich from the plate and nibbled at one corner of it.

"I'm Mrs. Strickland. The vicar who brought you in here is my father. I hope we won't have to wait much longer for good news of your husband."

The woman gave Lucy a queer look. "My name is Alice Leadbitter, ma'am. And it ain't my husband who's down the mine. He's helping them dig. Only wish I could. It's so hard to wait and not be able to do anything. My boy's in that mine, Mrs. Strickland. Poor little mite. He'll be that scared." Her lower lip began to quiver and Lucy could see Alice Leadbitter's eyes misting with tears.

"Your son? Mrs. Leadbitter, you can't be any older than I am. How could you have a son working in a coal mine?"

"I'm twenty-four. My Geordie is eight years old. He only started working last month."

A boy of eight employed at such dangerous, backbreaking work. Lucy could hardly believe her ears. She'd heard tales of child labor in the big industrial cities to the south, but here in the Pennines? Drake would soon put a stop to that practice. But where was Drake? She'd seen him ride out for High Head at a furious speed. All afternoon she'd kept glancing over her shoulder, expecting him to blaze down on her with a stern lecture about her conduct.

"I didn't want him to go." Mrs. Leadbitter wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "I told John the lad was too young to be working. John said he'd started working on his pa's farm when he

was a good bit younger than our Geordie. We needed the money, with another mouth to feed soon, so there was nothing for it but to put Geordie to work. Then this happened. How long will their air last? What if the gas builds up and explodes? I'll never forgive myself if... if..."

Lucy reached for the woman's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"Beg your pardon, ma'am."

Lucy glanced up to see Anthony Brown returned from delivering food to the rescuers. "The fellows up to the mine shaft nearly tore me to pieces getting at that grub. They said could you send more?"

"That we shall, Anthony. But first, what is the news? Mrs. Leadbitter's boy is in the mine, so she's naturally anxious to know how soon he'll be out."

The man flashed Alice Leadbitter an apologetic glance. "Fraid I wouldn't know that, ma'am. Don't know as the chaps doing the digging have any notion how soon they'll break through. They've shifted a pile of earth and rock, though, I can tell you. There's one fellow there, a stranger—big tall man digging for all he's worth."

"My husband," Lucy cried, barely aware of the ring of pride in her voice.

"That explains it," said Anthony. "I offered him a drink from one of them bottles. He takes a swig then he says, 'Best use this brandy's ever been put to.' Another swig and a sandwich and he was right back to digging again."

Lucy nodded. "Go ask the women over at that table to refill your basket, Anthony. I'll be with you directly."

She turned to Mrs. Leadbitter. "You heard Mr. Brown. My husband is personally leading the rescue. He is a very determined man, Mrs. Leadbitter. He'll get your Geordie out safe and sound."

Alice Leadbitter's reply was drowned out by a low, rumbling sound in the distance.

Someone cried, "There's been another rock slide!"

A furor erupted in the overseer's office as anxious women rushed to the windows. Lucy sat rooted to her chair. Drake was out there, burrowing toward the trapped miners. What if he was now entombed, himself? Or crushed by a falling boulder? With a start Lucy came to herself again. She and Mrs. Leadbitter were holding each other's hands so tightly, their knuckles had gone white.

Chapter Seven

THE FIRST OF the injured rescue crew arrived at Lucy's makeshift aid station within minutes. She pushed down her paralyzing fear for Drake's safety by concentrating on her duties.

"Bring him this way. Put him on the bed. Shift that settee into this room as well. Has anyone seen my basket of bandages?"

Peering closely at her first patient, Lucy recognized him as the stranger who'd appeared at Silverthorne that morning. Had it been this very day? Lucy felt as though she'd been at High Head for a week at least. The man's leg was distended at a painful-looking angle below the knee. Fortunately the fractured bone had not pierced the flesh of his leg.

Lucy glanced around, hoping to spy the doctor she had sent for. She did not feel confident to set a broken bone. The man's other injury, a gash on the forehead, she immediately tended with a clean cloth and hot water.

"Will he be all right, Mrs. Strickland?"

Lucy looked into the anxious face of Mrs. Leadbitter, who now held the man's hand as tightly as she'd recently held Lucy's.

"It could have been much worse. Once the doctor gets here, he can set your husband's leg." Lucy handed over her cloth and water basin. "Since you're here, I'll leave you to wash and bandage his forehead while I see to the others."

She hesitated, wanting to ask John Leadbitter a question, but not daring. Part of her cried out that she could not stand the suspense—she must know the worst. Another part of her shrank from finding out how bad the worst might be.

It would serve her right if something awful had happened to Drake. After all, she had wished him dead instead of Jeremy. No use trying to excuse herself by pleading the extremity of her grief or insisting she hadn't truly meant it. She had been a wicked, ungrateful creature and now she might never have the chance to say she was sorry.

"Mrs. Strickland, the doctor's here. Do you want a word with him?" Anthony Brown interrupted Lucy's self-indictment.

"Yes, thank you." She picked her way through the chaos, thankful for the distraction and an excuse to postpone her fateful question.

For the next hour, as she conferred with the doctor and administered aid to the injured, Drake was never far from her thoughts. He had not come in for medical attention, which might mean he'd escaped harm. Or was he beyond medical help? Lucy shivered as an icy hand clutched her heart.

"Don't tell me you find it cold, Mrs. Strickland." The doctor chuckled as he sewed up a gash on a patient's shoulder. "With the fires going and all the bodies crammed in here, it feels like an anteroom of hell, if you'll pardon the expression."

"Cold? No, doctor, only a chill down my back. Perhaps a draft from the door opening."

"Perhaps." The doctor sized Lucy up with a glance. "You may be experiencing the symptoms of shock, ma'am. Hardly surprising after what you have been through today." He patted her hand in a fatherly way. "We have the worst under control now. Why don't you go find a seat and treat yourself to a bowl of that good soup I smell?"

At the mention of food, Lucy's stomach made the most unladylike growling noises. She flashed the doctor an embarrassed grin. "I believe I had better follow your prescription, sir."

As she sank onto a corner stool, her hands gratefully clutching a warm mug of lamb broth, Lucy could only echo Alice Leadbitter's conviction. She would never forgive herself if anything had happened to Drake. True, he was proud, antagonistic and thoroughly preoccupied with his business concerns. But he was a man of his word, a man who took his responsibilities seriously. Lucy had even begun to suspect he cared about people in that distant, impersonal way of his.

In short, Drake was the complete opposite of his brother and she had not been able to forgive him for it—until now. She'd been unfair, expecting him to be a replica of Jeremy just as he'd been unfair expecting her to be a duplicate of Lady Phyllida. He had done her an invaluable service rescuing her reputation, providing her child with a name and a future. How had she repaid him? With petulance and childish spite.

If only God would grant her one more chance to make it all right. Lucy heaved a sigh. As a clergyman's daughter, she knew the futility of trying to strike bargains with the Almighty.

Gradually, as she tried to screw up her courage to ask about Drake, Lucy overheard snippets of conversation around her. Several

men from the rescue party, those with only slight injuries, were huddled near the fire devouring soup and sandwiches while passing around a bottle of Drake's brandy.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw..."

"...diggin' like a man possessed."

"Who'd he say he was?"

"Ant'ny Brown claims he's the new owner."

"I reckon Ant'ny's been at the barley jar." The speaker tipped a swig of the brandy.

"John Leadbitter says he's some high mucky-muck from down Mayeswater," said the next man, holding out his hand for the bottle. "Lord or earl or some'ut."

The other men responded with skeptical chuckles. "I never seen no lord or earl wield a shovel or hoist a barrow like that. Whoever he is, he knows how to work and that's a fact."

"I feel a might guilty sitting here warm and fed while he's still at it." The others squirmed in their seats, stroking their bandages like treasured badges of privilege.

Lucy wanted to hurl herself onto these gruff, grimy men in delighted relief. She settled for closing her eyes and breathing a silent prayer of thanks. God might not make bargains, but he did dispense grace. Unworthy as she was, she had been granted a second chance.



Drake set his lips in a tight grim line to stifle the exclamation of pain that rose in his throat every time he hefted his shovel. He'd come through the hail of rocks and dirt without any visible injuries, fired more desperately than ever to dig out the trapped miners. They had been so close before the last rock slide. Drake had felt a faint draft of warm air on his face. Now they had to shift this new debris before more fell, with half the crew too badly hurt to continue.

A twinge of pain in his back, about half way down his left side, had gradually intensified to its present agonizing pitch. On top of that, his head throbbed with a pulsing, dizzying ache. It made him stagger when he heaved his shovel of dirt into the waiting cart. Drake sucked in a breath of raw night air through his clenched teeth. With vicious strength, he thrust the point of his shovel at the

wall of earth before him. In the flickering light of the torches, he could imagine the oily, deceitful face of Janus Crook mocking him.

In truth, his pride pained Drake almost as much as his back or his head. For hours now, as he'd gone about his work with ruthless singularity of purpose, he'd overheard enough to realize the overseer had duped him. Drake took little comfort from knowing the previous owner and even the miners hadn't suspected Crook until it was too late.

With mealy-mouthed duplicity he'd told the owners and the workers each what they'd expected to hear. Playing on their natural prejudices and feeding their mutual mistrust, all the while he'd defrauded High Head colliery of a small fortune. Drake would not have put it past the villain to have caused this crisis to cover his escape. If he found a single scrap of evidence to support such a possibility, Drake vowed he'd prosecute the blackguard to the fullest extent of the law... provided they could find him.

"I can't keep up with you." One of the other men leaned on his shovel. "I need a minute to catch me breath."

Acknowledging the comment with a terse nod, Drake continued the mechanical rote of digging, wincing slightly each time he hefted the loaded shovel. If he stopped for a rest now, he feared he might never be able to get started again.

"Reckon we'll get to 'em before their air runs out?"

Though he grunted something vaguely affirmative, Drake felt a lethal garrote of fear tighten around his throat in response to the fellow's words. As a boy, one of his cruel tutor's favorite punishments had been shutting him in a cupboard. He knew that terrifying sense of the walls slowly closing in, the darkness threatening to suffocate you. Even now the thought of it made his legs go weak. That was what drove him to keep digging long after his body screamed to stop, because those men were his responsibility and because he knew what they must be feeling.

"Mug of soup or coffee, lads?" The little one-armed fellow appeared with his basket. "Anything for you, Mr. Strickland?"

Drake shook his head doggedly. Several drops of sweat rolled down his brow, but he dared not break his rhythm by stopping to brush them out of his eyes.

"Maybe you ought to come back down the hill with me, sir," said the man. "You don't look well. You've been at it for hours. It's time you take a rest."

"Once we get the men out," Drake growled, each word costing him an effort.

"If you say so, sir. Your wife's done a first rate job taking care of everyone. If it wasn't for her, folks would still be out waiting in the cold. Lord knows what you lads would have done for food, let alone doctoring for the ones who got hurt."

Drake didn't have any spare strength to answer but he let his thoughts turn to Lucy. Slowly the tightness in his throat began to ease. What was she doing here? Had his stern lecture made some impression on her after all? Drake doubted it. He remembered the golden sparks of defiance flashing provocatively in her brown eyes. She'd sworn she would never change.

Perhaps she hadn't.

The thought robbed Drake of what little breath he had. He'd had a nagging feeling that Janus Crook reminded him of someone. Just then he realized who... Phyllida. Why had it never occurred to him that she had nothing to gain by befriending Lucy? Was it possible that Phyllida had pitted him against his wife in the same way Crook had pitted owners against miners? The more he thought about the past weeks at Silverthorne, the more likely it seemed.

Nothing galled Drake as much as being made a fool. Phyllida would pay for her meddling, he vowed as his shovel struck a particularly savage blow. It met with far less than usual resistance, burying itself halfway up the handle. When Drake withdrew it, he once again felt the brush of warm stale air against his cheek. Before he could gasp out the marvelous news that they'd broken through at last, he heard a high treble voice from beyond the barricade of stones and dirt.

"I hate this dark!" a child's voice cried. "I want out! It's choking me!"

Those were the very words he had cried as a boy, even after he'd learned the futility of uttering them. Drake staggered back, dropping heavily onto a wheelbarrow loaded with dirt. The sound of that child's anguish galvanized the other rescuers. They attacked the remainder of the fall with renewed energy, hollering encouragement to the miners within. As Drake sat paralyzed on the dirt-filled barrow, he began to tremble.



Surprised to realize she'd fallen asleep, Lucy woke to find herself slumped in her corner seat. She rubbed her eyes and stretched. Every muscle in her body protested how she had overtaxed them in the past twenty-four hours.

The fire had died to a bed of faintly glowing embers, which cast a dim orange light over the room. Two middle-aged women had fallen asleep slumped over the table where they sat. Four others, still awake and watchful, clustered together in a tight circle near the window. The injured rescuers had vacated their place in front of the hearth in favor of their own beds. Shamed by Drake's tireless example, one or two might have returned to the mine.

At the thought of Drake, alive and unhurt, Lucy drew an easy breath. Then she shook her head over her own folly. How ridiculous to have fretted over the safety of a marble man like Lord Silverthorne. At this very minute he was probably plying his shovel with the relentless power of Mr. Watt's steam engine, immune to cold, hunger, or despair. Once he finished, he would surge down the hill to give her a thorough dressing-down for conduct unbecoming a viscountess.

She had promised herself to treat him with greater forbearance from now on. It would not be easy.

Just then, one of the women by the window broke into quiet sobbing. Lucy understood. By her reckoning, the time must be coming on three in the morning. It was an hour Lucy loathed. Too soon for even the earliest risers to be up. Too late for any but the most debauched of night owls. An hour when human spirit and energy were at their lowest ebb. Troubles always looked their worst then.

Lucy felt her own eyes tingle with tears of sympathy. In this one day, so crowded with toil and anguish, she had drawn close to the people of High Head. She could name to a man every miner trapped below. She knew all the reasons they had to live—a new bride, a baby on the way, an ailing mother, a growing family. It would take more than Drake's relentless effort to free those men. In the end, there was no guarantee they would find anyone alive. Lucy quailed at that thought.

Whatever this day might bring, she did not mean to meet it crying in the corner. Heaving her weary body up from the stool, she laid a new fire in the grate and set a kettle to heat. A quick glance over her food stores assured her she would soon need to send the

wagon back to Silverthorne for additional supplies. Treading quietly so as not to wake the sleeping or intrude upon the private vigils of the others, she made her rounds to check on the injured men. Finding her father dozing in an armchair, she hunted up a spare blanket and covered him with it.

John Leadbitter moaned restlessly in his sleep. His wife reached over and stroked his cheek with her hand to calm him. The poor soul. This one day had etched deep lines on her brow. Lucy's heart ached with shared worry.

Her gaze strayed to the window and the distant, flickering torches that lit the rescue efforts. *Please, Drake, she silently willed her husband. Get the boy out safely. At least get him.*

Were her tired eyes playing tricks on her? Lucy rubbed them again and stepped closer to the window. The torches bobbed about, moving down the hill. Her stomach constricted. Not another rock slide. That would stall the rescue efforts dangerously.

Then, on the clammy upland wind, she caught the distant rumble of excited cries and hoarse cheers.

"Alice," she whispered, her voice tight with emotion. "They're coming down the hill. I think it's good news!"

Mrs. Leadbitter flew from the room before she had fairly got the words spoken. Lucy followed, pausing only to grab her shawl and to alert the other women. She emerged from the overseer's front door into a courtyard boiling with jubilant tumult. At the center of it all was a sturdy little figure perched on a man's shoulder. Lucy saw Alice Leadbitter hurl herself at man and boy, bringing the child down into her waiting arms. Her thin shoulders heaved with the effort to exorcize a day's hoarded tears in the space of a few short minutes.

Lucy skirted the crowd, making her way up the path to the mine. Her feet and her heart, so heavily weighed down only moments ago, suddenly felt lighter than air. She practically flew up the path, stopping only to confirm the obvious—all the miners had come out alive.

"That you, Mrs. Strickland?"

Lucy noticed a slight, wiry figure bringing up the tail end of the joyful procession. "Yes, Mr. Brown." She clasped his one hand warmly. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Aye, ma'am, close to a miracle, you might say. Are you looking for your husband, by any chance?"

Lucy nodded. She hadn't quite realized until that instant what had compelled her to come here.

"That's good." Anthony Brown shook his head in grim puzzlement. "He's still in there." He jerked his head toward the tunnel. The opening looked none too solid. "Just sits. Don't say a word. If you asked me, he pushed himself too hard trying to dig them men out."

"But he did get them out. Every single one. Alive." Lucy could barely contain her admiration and wonder at what Drake had wrought. "You go on. I'll see to my husband."

Lucy gave an involuntary shudder as she passed into the mouth of the tunnel. The air felt surprisingly warm. The muted glow of the disappearing torches scarcely penetrated the debris-choked passageway. Lucy startled at the sound of a rock tumbling down a dirt slope. Then she heard another sound very nearby—a man's rapid, rasping breath.

Groping toward the source, she stumbled upon Drake.

Compelled by some remnant of elation, she threw her arms around his neck. "I'm so proud of you. To have helped rescue all those men."

He did not respond at first, receiving her embrace with weary passivity. When she tried to back away, however, he clasped her to him with such desperate force it took her breath away.

"There were children in that mine." His words rasped with emotion plumed from the stormy depths of his soul. "Little boys trapped in the dark."

Lucy felt his wide shoulders shudder as one harsh sob after another came retching out of him. The pressure of his cheek against the swollen flesh of her breast was almost as painful as hearing a strong man weep. Instead of pushing him away, Lucy cradled his head in her arms and held him closer still.

So Drake Strickland was not made of cold marble after all, but vulnerable flesh and blood. With a pang, Lucy experienced the birth of a strange new feeling for him. She bent her head forward, until her cheek brushed his hair. He smelled of sweat and coal dust and courage.

Chapter Eight

“**H**USH. NOW. EVERYTHING’S all right.”

In response to Lucy’s comforting words, Drake fought to bring his rampaging emotions under control. For some inexplicable reason he felt lightened and peaceful, even safe within the delicate circle of her arms. Her voice and her touch were soft and warm—like the haven he had been seeking all his life, without success. At the same time, Drake hated himself for his display of weakness. Perversely, he also resented Lucy for having witnessed it.

“You don’t understand.” He wrenched himself away from her, though his heart cried out to burrow deeper into the sweet nest of her embrace. “It’s *my* fault those children were in this cursed mine. If they’d died, I’d never have been able to live with myself.”

“Listen to me, Drake Strickland.” Lucy forcefully gripped his arm, re-establishing the connection between them. Hard as he tried, he could not bring himself to pull away. “You did not send those children into the mine. I’ll wager you didn’t even know they were there until half an hour ago.”

Since she seemed to demand some acknowledgement, Drake nodded. Then, remembering she couldn’t see him, he muttered a curt word of agreement.

“I thought so.” She sounded vindicated in her trust of his good intentions. “Thanks to you, the Leadbitter boy and all the others have come out alive. I know you’ll do everything in your power to prevent this kind of thing from ever happening again.”

“Of course I will.”

“In that case,” Lucy slackened her grip on his arm and let her hand slide down to grasp his, “you have nothing to reproach yourself for.” She tugged at Drake’s hand. “If it’s all the same to you, I would like to get out of this infernal tunnel before it collapses on us.”

“You’re right. It isn’t safe here.”

As Drake rose from his seat on the wheelbarrow, a piercing pain in his side made him cry out.

“What’s the matter? You’re hurt, aren’t you?” Lucy draped his arm over her shoulder, preparing to sustain his weight—as if she could. For an instant Drake forgot his injury, marveling at how

snugly she fit beneath his arm. His sleep-starved mind conjured absurd images of Eve, created from Adam's rib.

"Ribs." He grunted. "I may have broken one."

"You're certain that's all?" She didn't sound very confident of his veracity. They groped their way toward the mouth of the tunnel. Drake found himself leaning heavily on her.

"Feel dizzy," he admitted. "Got knocked on the head by a rock."

"It's a mercy you have such a good thick skull," Lucy scolded gently. "Why didn't you come down to our aid station and get doctored with the other injured men? Several of those who came to us had less wrong with them than you do, by the sound of it."

"Told you. Had to get those men out," Drake muttered through his clenched teeth. Each step over the uneven ground jarred his ribs and made him feel as if he were being repeatedly stabbed with a dull knife.

"Of course. It was your duty." He could hear the exasperation in her voice.

"Yes. Is it so hard for you to understand? What made you come here to tend people you've never met before?"

"Can we stop and rest a minute?" Lucy puffed.

"If you like. We're clear of the worst." Drake eased himself to the ground with Lucy's help, letting out a sharp hiss of pain as his ribs protested.

The muted hubbub of celebration drifted up from the foot of the hill on the still, cold air. Overhead, the sky shimmered with icy starlight. Drake shivered. Immediately, he felt Lucy bundle her heavy shawl around him.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he snapped. "Get this back on your own shoulders. It's not the first time I've been cold. I can stand it."

"Well if that's the way you're going to be, stubborn creature..." Kneeling behind him, Lucy brought the thick folds of wool around to encase them both. Soon Drake could feel the warmth of her body on his back, the soft rounding of her breasts pillowing his neck. He imagined what it might be like if she were kneeling in front of him. Suddenly Drake felt uncomfortably warm and his breeches uncomfortably tight.

He jumped up as though she'd lit a fire under his backside, gasping as the abrupt movement jolted his ribs. "Can you make it the rest of the way?"

Lucy resumed her place by his side.

"I can if you can," she announced defiantly.

"You never answered me," Drake pressed. Though speech was an effort, he needed to talk. To take his mind off the pain and off the pleasure of having Lucy lodged tightly under his wing.

"What was the question?"

"Why did you come to High Head? It wasn't a wise idea."

"I know," she interrupted. "It is beneath the dignity of a viscountess to consort with common miners."

Drake almost laughed out loud as she aped Phyllida's pedantic tone. So he'd guessed right. Phyllida had been filling her head with all this *viscountess* nonsense. By the sound of it, Lucy disdained the whole business as heartily as he did.

"What a load of rubbish!" she continued. "If a viscount can lower himself to wield a shovel and push a barrow, I don't see why his wife can't pitch in, too. A sorry mess you'd have been in if I hadn't come. No food for the rescue party. No one to tend the men who got hurt in that second rock slide."

"You're right."

"Right? What do you mean? Right about what?" They were nearing the overseer's house. In the glow of torchlight, Drake could make out Lucy's puzzled expression as she stared up at him.

"About everything. We couldn't have managed without you." He nodded toward the crowd, which continued to swell as word of the miners' deliverance circulated through the village.

Lucy just looked at him. Torchlight, starlight and the glimmer of a fresh new dawn glowed in her soft brown eyes. Whatever tight, prim dressing she'd pinned her hair into yesterday morning, it had dissolved into flyaway curls and delicate gold tendrils, gently framing her face. The night air had nipped her cheeks to a healthy pink and she had a smudge of coal dust on her nose from nuzzling his soot-caked hair.

Drake had never imagined a creature so beautiful.



Braced for a severe reprimand, Lucy hardly knew what to make of Drake's frank admission that he... they... had needed her. He was staring at her in the most disconcerting way. No doubt she looked a fright. She'd have died of mortification if Jeremy had ever seen her in such a state.

“We need to get you home to Silverthorne and have a doctor check you over.” As they edged into the boiling crowd, Lucy had to shout directly into Drake’s ear. Even then, she wasn’t certain he’d heard her.

“There’s something I must tell everyone, first,” Drake bellowed back.

With mingled admiration and sympathy, Lucy watched his futile efforts to make himself heard above the joyous tumult around them. Each time he took a deep breath, he flinched. Whatever his injuries might be, she did not want him making them worse with such straining.

Spying Anthony Brown nearby, she reached out her free hand and tugged on his coattail. He spun around, flashing her a wide grin of recognition.

As he leaned toward her, Lucy shouted, “His lordship has something to say! Can you get everyone’s attention?”

The man replied with a wink. Drawing his lips taut with two fingers, he issued a whistle as shrill and din-piercing as had ever assaulted Lucy’s ears. The noise of the crowd hushed so rapidly and completely, she wondered if they had inhaled their jubilation on bated breath.

“New owner has some’ut to say,” Anthony Brown’s voice boomed out in the expectant silence. “You mind him, now.”

Drake nodded his thanks. “I mean to dispatch the sheriff at once to investigate this *accident*. I expect you to give him your full cooperation. When the investigation is complete, we’ll make repairs and reopen the mine. I shall do everything in my power to see that events like this are never repeated at High Head.”

Seeing the stricken looks on the faces of several women, Lucy knew just what they were thinking. The mine closed indefinitely. A number of the men injured. Winter almost here. She whispered a suggestion to Drake.

He nodded his agreement. “Everyone connected with the mine will draw full wages until it reopens.”

A ragged cheer met Drake’s announcement.

“Until I can appoint a new overseer...” A fit of coughing overcame him before he could complete his sentence. The pain each spasm caused was clearly etched on his face. Lucy knew she must waste no time getting him home.

“Until a new overseer comes,” she pitched her voice loud, to

project over Drake's raspy bark, "Anthony Brown is in charge."

No one looked more surprised by this announcement than Mr. Brown himself. Tugging off his cloth cap, he held it over his heart as though swearing a vow. "I'll do my best for you, ma'am. That I will."

Though Drake's coughing had eased, Lucy could feel him leaning more heavily upon her. "I'm sure you'll do splendidly. I count myself a very good judge of character and ability. Now, I must get my husband home."

Immediately several men sprang into action. Before Lucy knew it, the tilbury was hitched and ready for the return journey to Silverthorne.

Spying her father nearby, she called out to him, "Will you come back with us?"

Hastening to Lucy's side, Vicar Rushton patted her arm. "Unless you have need of me, I believe I will stay awhile. I would like to conduct a short service of thanksgiving."

Several people within earshot nodded or murmured their agreement with the vicar's suggestion.

"What a fine idea." Lucy dropped a warm kiss on her father's ruddy cheek then glanced up at the driver's seat of the gig. Somehow, Drake had managed to pull himself up there. He sat rigidly erect. In the growing light his face and hands looked almost as black as his hair. What effort did it cost him to sit there, hurt and weary as he must be? To look at him, who would guess the private torment that had fueled his superhuman effort to dig out those trapped miners? With those questions stinging her conscience, Lucy scrambled to beside him.

Drake gave the reins a jog and they were off, leaving High Head less than twenty-four hours after they had arrived. To Lucy it felt more like a month had passed. Part of her wished they could have stayed in the mining village, plain Mr. and Mrs. Strickland, instead of the viscount and his lady hemmed in by protocol at stately Silverthorne.

As the tilbury rattled down the steep road, Lucy heard behind them, "Three cheers for the Stricklands, all!"

Lucy glanced over at Drake, but he gave no sign what he might be thinking or feeling. When they were finally out of sight of the village, he passed the reins over to her with a weary sigh. For a time the two-wheeled carriage jogged along the winding road from

High Head to Nicholthwait. Harness metal and the horse's hooves played a kind of soothing pastoral music, occasionally punctuated by the bleating of Herdwick sheep grazing lazily by the wayside.

A swath of early-morning mist hung over the Mayes Valley. After those few suffocating minutes in the mine shaft, Lucy relished the scent of crisp autumn air. In the wake of those long, tense hours surrounded by people, she savored this quiet solitude and Drake's undemanding company. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at him. He sat bolt upright with his eyes closed. The firm chiseled lines of his dirt-blackened profile looked more than ever like they'd been hewn from black marble.

Lucy cleared her throat. She had made a promise to herself and she meant to keep it. Something told her it would be easier to begin here and now, rather than wait until they were back at Silverthorne. But where to start?

"I was proud to call myself your wife today. You did well." Her words emerged as a muted murmur. Had Drake even heard her tentative overture? "I've behaved very badly toward you of late. The reasons don't matter now. What matters is that I promise to mend my ways, if you'll forgive me and let us begin again. I would like us to be friends at least... for the child's sake."

"Very well." The reply rumbled from deep in his chest and he did not bother to open his eyes. "Friends."

Slowly as they neared Nicholthwait, Drake began to list toward Lucy until his head came to rest on her shoulder. There it remained as the gig wended its way back to Silverthorne.

Chapter Nine

Drake strained toward consciousness like a drowning swimmer desperate to breach the surface of the water above him. Everything was dark. Reason dictated that he must be back at Silverthorne in his own bed. His senses adamantly contradicted that assumption. He heard the soft crackle of a fire, felt its enveloping warmth, smelled the sweet pungency of wood smoke. That was not all he smelled. The savory aroma of lamb and onions. A faint breath of... lavender?

It all conspired to produce an atmosphere of *coziness*. That was not a word Drake had ever considered to describe his bedchamber. The spacious, airy room occupied one corner of the east wing. It had large windows on two walls which afforded a magnificent view of the lakeland. In the center of the third wall, a wide archway opened into a generously proportioned dressing room.

Sparsely appointed, even by the tastefully restrained standards of the time, his bedchamber contained a small writing desk and chair, a nightstand and a bed. The latter was a curious modern affair without the usual high posts and curtains. Since he spent so little time there, Drake seldom had a fire laid in the hearth.

Until that moment, he'd never thought his bedroom lacking in anything. Lying there, poised on the borderland of dreams, Drake suddenly realized what a cold, bare place it was. Cold and bare as his life. That was a thought he could not bear to dwell on.

Willing his body to respond, Drake tried to sit up. Waves of pain restrained him. He heard someone moan. Was he the one making that sound? The scent of lavender came closer, accompanied by the muted rustle of a woman's skirts. Something cool and smooth came to rest lightly on his forehead.

"Drake, are you awake? How do you feel?"

At the sound of Lucy's whisper, Drake realized he must be back at Silverthorne after all. Wary of the pain provoked by his attempt to sit up, he raised his eyelids to mere slits.

Lucy's face hovered in his field of vision, luminous in the muted glow of firelight, framed by a wispy golden halo. Her fine tawny brows knitted together in an expression of tender concern. The sight brought a pleasant rush of warmth coursing into Drake's loins. He

shrank from it as intensely as he had from the pain.

"How do you think I feel?" He twitched his head away from the touch of her hand, gasping as another searing bolt pierced his skull.

"More dead than alive I should think, after what you've been through. I suppose it's a good sign you've recovered sufficiently to complain." She picked up a bowl and spoon from the edge of his night table. "Lie still and have some of this broth. Mrs. Maberley made it especially for you."

When Drake opened his mouth to protest that he could not simply loll in bed for days on end, Lucy shoved a spoonful in. He had no choice but to swallow the most delicious bit of broth he'd ever tasted. Suddenly conscious of the hunger gnawing at his belly, Drake decided he'd better eat something to help regain his strength. For a while he said nothing, obediently opening his mouth each time Lucy offered him a spoonful of soup. Only when the pangs of hunger began to subside did he challenge her.

"What time is it?" He squinted toward the clock on the mantel. He could scarcely make out its face in the dim light. Was it his imagination or was his vision a bit blurred?

"Teatime," said Lucy. "You've been asleep since we got back from High Head, yesterday morning. I feared you might never wake."

Jagged recollections of High Head flashed in Drake's mind. "Must get up." He struggled against the pain and dizziness. "There are urgent matters that require my attention."

"Such as...?" Lucy pressed him back gently but firmly with a hand on his chest. His *bare* chest.

Had they not had the decency to put a nightshirt on him? Drake fumed to himself as he felt his face suffuse with color. Lucy's touch was not intended to be the least provocative, he knew. It had a most provocative effect, all the same.

"Don't be obtuse, woman," he snapped. He hated not being in control of his own mutinous body. "The sheriff for a start. I must brief him on the situation at High Head and send him to investigate."

"Done." Lucy tucked the coverlet securely around him.

Drake flashed a glance at the portrait of his mother hanging above the mantel. He had no recollection of her or anyone else ever tucking him into bed. In fact, he might have remained entirely ignorant of such intimate domestic rituals, but for Jeremy. When the lad had come to Silverthorne after the death of Drake's

stepmother, he had insisted his brother tuck him into bed each night. Reluctantly, awkwardly, Drake had done it. Displays of tenderness had never come easily for him, but until Jeremy went away to school he had never missed a night.

The gesture held disproportionate significance for Drake. Having never been on the receiving end, he was not sure he liked it. Particularly from Lucy.

“What do you mean—*done*?”

His wife rolled her wide-set eyes. “Now who’s being obtuse? I sent for the sheriff as soon as we got home. I explained what had happened at your mine and asked him if he would look into it. Did I presume?” she asked with a trace of good-natured irony in her voice.

“Hardly.” Drake marveled that she’d shown such presence of mind. “Time was of the essence. You did well. It just never occurred to me that you’d... But, see here, the mine is only the most pressing of my obligations. What of my other concerns? The tannery? The mills? They require my supervision as well.”

“At this hour?” Lucy coaxed another spoonful of soup into him. “I think not. Besides, I believe you underestimate your managers just as you underestimate me. I doubt it can be good for them—running to you with every minor problem, looking to you for direction in every decision. What would have become of them if more serious harm had befallen you at High Head? Turmoil. Chaos.” She answered her own rhetorical question then posed another for Drake. “Is that what you want?”

He lifted his chin defiantly. “Of course not. What are you suggesting? That I abdicate all responsibility for the enterprises I’ve built from nothing?”

“Hardly.” Lucy’s exasperated glare suddenly softened. “I’m only saying your business concerns are like maturing children. You need to let them grow up, make mistakes if need be, but learn to rely on their own judgment and only call on your guidance in truly critical matters. That way, they will be able to continue operating well even if something does happen to you, heaven forbid.”

“That makes sense,” Drake conceded reluctantly, thinking what a good mother she would make with such an attitude.

“Can I be hearing right?” Lucy shook her head, a droll expression on her face that made Drake forget everything but the urge to laugh. “The imperious Viscount Silverthorne disclaiming his

vaunted infallibility?"

His lips twitched and a chuckle escaped. "Only admitting I recognize good advice when I hear it."

Lucy offered him another spoonful of broth. "Truly, the age of miracles is not past."

As more laughter overtook him, Drake choked on the broth. With each spasm of coughing, his injured ribs throbbed. Lucy hovered anxiously over him, saying over and over how sorry she was to have made him laugh while he was trying to eat.

"I thought you wanted us to be friends," gasped Drake when his coughing had finally subsided. "Is this your idea of friendship—hectoring a poor invalid in his bed?"

In response to his jest, Lucy's fair complexion took on a furious red cast. "I didn't think you'd remember that. Besides, I'm only hectoring you for your own good. It will be far worse for your business concerns if you end up making yourself seriously ill because you have not taken proper care of yourself."

A rumbling bass voice sounded from the doorway. "I agree entirely, your ladyship. Perhaps between the two of us, we can convince this blockhead it is in everyone's best interest for him to take life easy for a while."

Drake's physician, friend and distant cousin, Charles Varoy, swept into the room. Strands of his iron-gray hair had pulled loose from their tie and flew in all directions.

"So our patient is sensible at last?" he asked Lucy.

Drake barely caught her wry mutter. "So he thinks."

"My wife thinks otherwise, Charles." Drake flashed the doctor an exaggerated wink.

"Does she, by Jove?" Dr. Varoy felt at Drake's throat for a pulse. "You're in a comical humor for a man who's nearly been smashed to a jelly. Are you in much pain?"

Drake shrugged. "Bearable."

"Ever the stoic. Well, let's get a proper look at your injuries. I only took a glance yesterday to reassure your wife that neither posed any immediate danger. I knew my doctoring would only interfere with the sleep you truly needed. Can you sit up?"

"I tried, but... my wife would have none of it." Clenching his teeth, Drake pulled himself upright. The pain was not as bad as the first time.

Lucy rose abruptly. Walking over to the hearth, she added more

coal to the fire, stirring the glowing embers with the poker.

"You've got yourself a wife now." The doctor chuckled again. What did he find so dashed amusing? "You'd better heed her advice."

"I didn't marry her to get advice," Drake snapped before he could stop himself. He glanced at Lucy, who had frozen for an instant in the act of replacing the fire irons. Drake cursed his own thoughtlessness. After High Head, he wanted to make things right with her—start afresh. Somehow, he'd fallen into this abominable habit of opposing her and it was proving difficult to break. Especially when his pulse sped up every time he looked at her.

"Are you going to get on with your examination?" he barked at the doctor.

Gently, Charles probed at a tender spot on Drake's back. Not gently enough. Before Drake could steel himself to contain it, an exclamation of pain broke from his lips.

"I don't wonder it hurts," said the doctor. "The rib is broken, all right, but I expect it's the bruising that pains you." He pulled a roll of bleached cotton from his satchel and wound it tightly around Drake's chest. "There. That will support the rib while it knits—as much as we can do, I'm afraid."

Drake replied with a stiff nod. The snug binding around his chest was an instrument of torture. He did not try to speak as the doctor cleaned his head wound with ungentle dispatch, directing Lucy to bring him water and hold the basin.

"Well, that's done," the doctor pronounced at last. "Now, let's have a quick look at the rest to you to make certain there's nothing else wrong." He tugged at the quilt, which covered Drake to the waist.

Grasping the edge of the coverlet to prevent the doctor from pulling it off, Drake glanced at Lucy. The basin clutched tightly in her hands, she stared at the quilt in horrified fascination.

"I'm still hungry," Drake blurted. "Could you fetch me more of Mrs. Maberley's broth?"

Lucy startled at his words. As she fumbled the basin, several drops of water spilled to the floor. "I beg your pardon? Oh, broth. Yes, of course." She quickly returned the basin to his dressing room, all the while chattering in a high breathless voice. "Mrs. Maberley has a huge tureen of it simmering on the fire, enough to feed the whole house. She'll be glad to hear you have an appetite to eat it."

Lucy recovered his soup bowl from the night table. "If you will excuse me, Dr. Varoy?"

"By all means, ma'am." The doctor beamed at her as he continued his tug-of-war with Drake over the quilt. "Rest and proper nourishment, the most effective medicine in the world."

As Lucy darted out the door, Drake relaxed his hold on the quilt. The doctor wrenched it clean off him.

"Such modesty in a newly married man." He laughed. "You needn't be embarrassed to let your bride see the effect she has on you... in spite of your injuries. If you like, I can tell her to go easy on you until your rib heals."

Ignoring the pain in his ribs, Drake grabbed the corner of his pillow and swung it, clouting his old friend soundly. The doctor rolled with the blow, laughing more heartily than ever—a sound that was beginning to grate on Drake's nerves.

After a brief look at his patient's sound lower limbs, Dr. Varoy twitched the bedclothes back over him. "If I catch you out of bed in less than a week, Viscount Silverthorne, I will insist upon thoroughly examining you from top to bottom... with your good lady as my assistant."

For a moment, Drake was too incensed to reply. By the time he worked up a dozen solid reasons why he must be up and about his business, the doctor had packed his satchel. He departed with a broad grin and a jaunty salute.



Lucy fled Drake's bedchamber clutching his soup bowl so tightly she almost expected it to shatter in her hands. Her cheeks tingled furiously and not from her recent proximity to the fire. Fiercely as she'd tried to distract herself, her gaze had strayed again and again to Drake, sitting naked in his bed for the doctor's examination with only the quilt covering him below the waist. Stealing surreptitious glances at his hard, lean torso, she'd recalled the feel of his bare chest beneath her fingertips.

The taut smooth flesh and the unexpected silkiness of the thatch of dark hair on his chest—Lucy's mouth went dry at the thought of it. There could be no denying that Viscount Silverthorne was a fine specimen of manhood. It was not embarrassment or modesty that had made her run off when the doctor had started to peel back the

bedclothes. It was the fear that they might catch her staring with unladylike fascination.

Engrossed in such thoughts, Lucy nearly barreled into Lady Phyllida.

"Lucinda, my dear, wherever are you bound in such a flying hurry?" Phyllida recovered her balance. "Is it Drake?" Her pale eyes bulged further than usual. "Has he taken a turn for the worse?"

"Oh no, Cousin Phyllida," Lucy gasped. "He is awake now and appears to have his wits about him. Doctor Varoy is checking him over at the moment. I am on my way to the kitchen to fetch him another bowl of broth. You can imagine how hungry he is."

"Quite." Phyllida eyed the bowl in Lucy's hands with polite horror, as if it were an overflowing chamber pot. "Is it necessary for you to scurry about the house like a common scullery maid? His lordship employs any number of servants. None overburdened with work so far as I can see. Surely, you don't mean to tend him yourself?"

Lucy opened her mouth to state precisely that intention. Then she realized that opposing Phyllida would only to serve to keep her dawdling in the corridor, engaged in a futile argument.

"I fear you will have a very uphill battle to make me into anything like a proper viscountess, Cousin." For once Lucy did not try to censor the impatience in her voice. It was going to take all her willpower to forge a more amicable relationship with her husband. She had made no such vow concerning Lady Phyllida Strickland. "If you will excuse me, I must fetch that broth. I'm sure it won't do Drake's temper any good to wait for food when he's scarcely eaten in two days."

"Drake is in a temper, is he?" A sly smile puckered the corners of Phyllida's thin lips. "I shouldn't wonder after the way you chased off across the county to dispense half the contents of Silverthorne's larder to a horde of grubby miners."

"As it happens, Cousin Phyllida, Drake was very..." The look of gleeful expectancy on Phyllida's face stopped Lucy cold. This toadying, pasty creature was up to something—though Lucy couldn't immediately work out what it might be.

One thing was clear to her, however. Mending relations with Drake would be much more difficult with Phyllida lurking about. Somehow she must dislodge Drake's cousin from Silverthorne and Lucy could see only one sure way of doing that.

“Well?” prompted Phyllida, audibly impatient. “Drake was very what?”

“Angry.” Lucy came to herself. “You were right. He was very angry with me. One good thing did come of it, however.”

Phyllida’s high thin brows arched questioningly.

“Apparently, my husband now sees the urgency of taking me to London.” Lucy prayed she would not be struck down for such an outright falsehood. “He insists we must go as soon as he is fit to travel.”

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?” Phyllida’s fishy eyes danced, and her thin lips stretched into the first sincere smile Lucy had witnessed on her. “That is wonderful news!”

“I thought you would be pleased.” That was more than she could expect from Drake once he learned what she’d done. Oh well, one more falsehood couldn’t land her in any worse trouble. “Drake asked me to inquire if you might return to London to ready the house for our arrival.”

“Mind?” Phyllida let loose a volley of shrill laughter. “I will be packed within the hour.” She laid one long-fingered hand to her flat bosom. “This is such a relief. The roads are still clear, thank goodness, and we shall be able to celebrate Christmas at home. Could we set out as soon as tomorrow?”

Lucy tried to keep a giddy note of relief from her own voice. “The sooner the better, I should think. The weather is so fickle at this time of year.”

“I shall keep the maids packing all night if I have to. Send one or two of them up from the kitchen to help me.”

“I’ll send someone straightaway, Cousin Phyllida,” Lucy called over her shoulder as she made for the staircase. Under her breath she muttered, “Anything to speed you on your way.”

Skipping down the stairs, Lucy found herself humming a merry little tune. Deep inside, however, her joy over Phyllida’s imminent departure was tempered by a qualm of dread. How would Drake react when he found out what she’d done?

Chapter Ten

“LONDON?” DRAKE STARED at Phyllida, all decked out in a puce-colored pelisse and matching bonnet. He hardly dared to hope he’d heard her correctly. “You and Reggie are leaving for London, today?”

Fiercely, he restrained his lips from curving into an eager smile. The chief reason he’d been so anxious to get about his business was the fear that he’d be a sitting target for Phyllida, if he was confined to bed. For weeks it had been his dearest wish to dislodge her from Silverthorne. Suddenly, without him having raised a hand, it was coming to pass.

“Perhaps it is for the best.” He tried to sound regretful but resigned. “I am in no condition to be agreeable company.” He touched his bandaged head in what he hoped was a piteous gesture. “Of course, Lucy will be far too occupied with tending her poor invalid husband to play the gracious hostess.”

Speaking Lucy’s name, he cast a furtive glance at her. She stood near the door of his bedchamber in an attitude of timid watchfulness.

“Drake, you are a caution!” Phyllida dismissed his last remark with a wave of one gloved hand. “You have plenty of servants to tend you. Lady Silverthorne is not some hired girl.” Her long sallow face brightened. “I have just had the cleverest thought. Lucinda might accompany Reggie and me back to London and you can join us once you’ve recovered.”

“Join you...?”

Darting to Drake’s bedside, Lucy pressed a cup of water into his hand. With a skittish glance toward Phyllida, she gasped, “You mustn’t mind him repeating everything you say. The doctor warned that his wits might be addled for a few days.”

To Drake, she spoke loudly and slowly. “Remember, my dear? You said we should go to London once you’re able to travel. You told me Cousin Phyllida must go ahead to ready the house for us.”

“I said no such—”

The pressure of Lucy’s slender fingers on his hand arrested Drake’s protest. Her face had gone pale and her eyes held an unmistakable plea. For what, he wasn’t sure. Forgiveness?

Permission? Drake was of two minds himself. Part of him wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and this woman who constantly provoked such unfathomable feelings in him. Another part wanted to draw her closer still—as close as she had been in the tunnel at High Head.

“Er... how very agreeable of you to set out so quickly, Phyllida.” Drake wasn’t certain what he should say about Lucy’s going until he had a clearer notion of her preference. “As for my wife, she is at liberty to go with you... if she wishes.”

She clutched his hand tighter still as if anchoring herself to Silverthorne. “I *do* believe my place is here with you.”

With such a definite sign of her wishes, Drake felt himself well-armed to declare, “Just so. A houseful of servants is all very well, but a man in my condition needs his wife. Besides, Phyllida, I know how anxious you are to launch Lucy in society. Imagine the gossip if I pack her off for London so soon after our marriage.”

Phyllida eyed Lucy with barely concealed vexation. “I was only thinking of the poor child and what a dull Christmas it will be for her. You must get well very soon, Drake, so you can bring Lucinda to London in time for the holidays.”

Just then Talbot appeared to announce that all was ready for Lady Phyllida’s departure. After several minutes of effusive farewells and insistent demands that they start for London the moment Drake was fit to travel, Phyllida left Silverthorne at last.

Dizzy with relief, Lucy threw her arms around Drake’s neck. “Thank you for not giving me away! I’m sorry for all the lies I told, but I simply couldn’t think of any other way to get rid of her. I know she is part of your family and you think her the perfect lady, but...”

Gently, Drake withdrew from her impulsive embrace. “No need to apologize. I only wish I’d realized that a false promise to visit London was all it would take to speed Phyllida and Reggie on their way. I’d have done it myself, weeks ago.”

“You would?” Lucy wondered if that bandage around Drake’s head might be tied a bit too tight. “The last time I raised the subject of London, you nearly bit my head off.”

“I know and I’m sorry for it. The truth is, Phyllida has played us for a pair of fools. I was the greater fool by far, since I know her and should have guessed her motives.”

“Motives?” Lucy asked. Whatever Drake was talking about, he

sounded sincerely chagrined. "I don't understand."

He drew a deep breath. "I'm certain Phyllida has been stirring up ill feeling between us, ever since our wedding day. For instance, she led me to believe you were desperate to get to London. She also claimed she was only staying on at Silverthorne because you couldn't bear to part with her."

"What a pack of nonsense!" Lucy jumped from her perch on the edge of Drake's bed and began to pace the room. "I wanted nothing to do with London. I merely gave in to her constant nagging on the subject when I realized it would be the only way to get rid of her."

Coming to an abrupt halt, she pointed an accusing finger at Drake. "*You* were the one who insisted on Phyllida staying." She felt herself starting to blush, though she could not fathom why. "To instruct me in proper decorum and make sure I didn't keep *low company*."

"Rot!" Drake sat up in his bed, a grimace of pain momentarily flickering across his features. "Utter rot, all of it. The only one who wanted Phyllida to stay on at Silverthorne was Phyllida herself. She tried to make each of us believe it was because of the other."

Snatches of Phyllida's conversation from the past weeks echoed in Lucy's thoughts. "Why would she want to make trouble between us? Is it because she disapproves of you marrying beneath your station?"

"Hardly." Drake chuckled. "You could be the Princess Royal and still not suit Phyllida." He eased himself back down onto his pillows. "With Jeremy gone, and until we have a son, Phyllida's Reggie stands to inherit Silverthorne. After Neville, of course, but I'd say there's precious little chance of him outliving me or getting any legitimate heirs of his own."

A sickening pang of shame seized Lucy. She hung her head. "Oh, dear. How stupid of me not to have realized! So you didn't enlist Phyllida to turn me into a proper viscountess?"

"Never." Drake's voice was soft but adamant. "I have always liked you the way you are."

Swiftly, Lucy glanced up at him, but he refused to meet her eyes. During their brief, intense courtship, Jeremy had paid her many charming compliments, but none had touched her as deeply as this halting admission of Drake's.

"So you don't object if I ride or read, or visit my old friends in the village?"

He glanced at her waist with a self-conscious grin. "Perhaps the riding can wait a few months. I certainly have no objection to your reading and I would positively encourage you to cultivate all your old friends. Poor Mrs. Sowerby has been quite bereft without you."

"Oh." Lucy gave a choked little gasp. "I will go to see her this very day. What must she think of me for staying away?" An equally distressing notion occurred to her. "What must you have thought? That's why you were so angry with me, wasn't it—the night we quarreled in my room? Because you thought I'd come over all top-lofty and deserted my old friends."

"In part." Drake shrugged. "I must apologize for my churlish behavior these past weeks. On top of Phyllida's constant presence, it must have made life at Silverthorne intolerable for you."

Lucy wrinkled her nose. "Not pleasant, I'll admit. That still doesn't excuse the things I said to you, and the way I acted."

"You meant what you said about my driving Jeremy to join the army, though, didn't you? I couldn't fathom what made him go. Now I see it was my fault all along." He looked so stricken, Lucy wished with all her heart she could recall that hurtful accusation.

"Jeremy was a man grown. He made his own choices, for his own reasons. Perhaps I wanted to blame you rather than believe he chose to leave me."

Her words eased Drake. She could tell, because he allowed himself to smile. His dark, sharp-hewn features seemed to radiate a glow from deep within. It made Lucy's breath catch in her throat.

A strange sensation of panic assailed her, though she could not think why—a need to escape his presence. As casually as possible, she said, "I believe I will celebrate my freedom from your cousins by paying a visit to the village."

A fresh pang of guilt for deserting him made her add, "Try to get some rest while I'm gone. Is there anything I can fetch you before I go?"

With a slow shake of his head, Drake waved her on her way. "Enjoy your liberty, and give Mrs. Sowerby my fondest regards."

She was halfway out the door when he called. "Lucy."

She glanced back.

To her questioning look he replied self-consciously, "Come back soon."

Was it her imagination or did something lost and lonely look back at her from the depths of his stormy eyes? Acting on an impulse she

did not understand, Lucy pressed two fingers to her lips, and blew a kiss back toward him.



As she came to the end of the chapter in Livy's *War With Hannibal*, Lucy let her voice die away. The only sounds in the room were the fire's soft crackle and Drake's deep, regular breathing. She glanced at him expectantly. Twice before she had paused in her reading. Each time he'd stirred, opened his eyes and asked her to continue. This time he lay quiet, his chest rising and falling slowly beneath his nightshirt. Lucy had almost nodded off more than once over this dry Roman history.

She set the heavy volume of Livy on Drake's night table. Quietly resuming her seat, she watched him sleep. Relaxed in slumber, his features had taken on an unexpected vulnerability, completely at odds with their waking appearance. Seeing him so unguarded, with only the flickering firelight playing over his face, it was almost possible to imagine him as a boy. A starveling, all bony wrists and ankles with dark, haunted eyes too large and too old for his pinched face.

Like the one Mrs. Sowerby had told her about that very afternoon.

Offering her humblest apologies for not calling sooner, Lucy had nobly resisted the urge to lay the blame on Lady Phyllida. No one had held her prisoner at Silverthorne, after all. She should have shown more spirit and stood up for what was important to her. Without a word of reproach, Mrs. Sowerby had made her welcome.

Over a cup of strong tea, Lucy gingerly raised the subject of Drake. "Do you recall that talk we had just before my wedding, Mrs. Sowerby?"

"I do. Stuck my pointy old nose in trying to make you see how fortunate you was to get a fine man like his lordship."

Lucy smiled ruefully. "Some things people can't be made to see, Mrs. Sowerby. Some things people have to discover for themselves." With that, she launched into a glowing account of Drake's heroism at High Head. Her old friend listened with rapt attention and a proprietary smile.

"You mentioned his lordship had a hard childhood," Lucy said as she concluded her account of the mine rescue. "He never talks

about it. Will you tell me what you know?"

After pondering Lucy's request for a moment, the old woman finally nodded. "I don't reckon it'll do any harm, what with you being his missus and all. Not many folks know the rights of it, you see. They all think he were brought up grand. But our Susan used to do for them up at the big house, before she married. The tales she carried home fair wrang a mother's heart, they did. His mam died bearing him, you know. A fine lady she was and well-liked by folk hereabouts. It was so sad."

Reflecting on Mrs. Sowerby's story, Lucy looked up at the portrait of Elizabeth Strickland hanging above Drake's mantel. No beauty, with the dark, definite features she'd bequeathed her son, the previous Lady Silverthorne had kind eyes and a hint of humor about her mouth. What a shame Drake had never known her.

"The lad were a frail, sickly little creature," Mrs. Sowerby had informed Lucy. "The doctors told the old master he wasn't likely to live long without its mother. Leave the child in the country, they said. It'll toughen him up, if it don't kill him. So that's what his lordship done. Left the boy here at Silverthorne and went off to London to forget his grief at the gaming tables. The more brass he frittered away, the worse ruin the estate fell into. Most of the house was shut up—damp from the leaking roof, moldy and cold as charity in the wintertime. Audrey Maberley and our Susan did what they could for young Master Drake.

"That tutor his lordship engaged for the boy was the very devil of a creature. Said he meant to toughen Master Drake up with plain food, fresh air, long walks, cold baths and the like. While all the time, he was spending what little brass his lordship sent on drink and bad company. Susan swore the poor child never had a single plaything nor a bit of fun in all his life. Used to make my blood boil, it did."

No wonder the viscount was such a stern, cold man, Lucy mused as she watched him sleep, without a single happy day to recollect from his whole childhood. Not surprising that he spent all his time on dull business matters, either, having never learned how to enjoy himself. Though he would surely deny it, Lucy knew he desperately needed someone to look after him, someone to bring a little sunshine into his life. How sad that he had insisted on playing the gallant fool and marrying a woman who could never love him as he deserved.

Lucy rebuked herself for such a thought. After all, the welfare of her baby lay in the gallant folly of his uncle. Laying one hand on her belly, now taut as a drumhead, Lucy reached out with the other, passing it gently over Drake's hair. Strange brooding feelings roiled in her heart. She scarcely knew what to make of them. Was it the child growing within her that made her long to protect and nurture even so assured a man as Viscount Silverthorne?

Smoothing Drake's bedclothes, she tucked them securely around him. With a last glance at his tranquil features, she picked up the candle and tiptoed from the room. At some point in the past several hours, she had come to an important decision. Perhaps she could not love Jeremy's crusty, insular brother but at least she could take care of him and try to bring a little happiness into his life. Did she not owe him that much?



Drake sat in his bed, his coverlet piled with sheets of paper like mounting snowdrifts. A crowd of men surged around it, each trying to make himself heard above the others. This was the first time Lucy had permitted his overseers an audience. All were clamoring for his attention, demanding decisions and solutions to their problems. Lucy had been right. They did need to learn how to take more responsibility. Drake could scarcely hear himself think.

"Milord, about that order from Lichfield..."

"...that new spinning jenny's been naught but trouble to us since we got it..."

"...though our raw tonnage is up over last month's, we've lost..."

"It's them ships from Nova Scotia, your lordship..."

Drake seized upon that remark. It had been a pet project of his. He'd bypassed the British shipyards, which were engaged in filling naval contracts, to buy cheap little vessels from the North American colonies.

"What about the Nova Scotia ships, Mr. Stokes?" Drake gestured for silence from the others.

"Lloyd's won't rate 'em for better than seven years, milord. Rough built, they claim."

"That's hardly surprising. From what I understand, the builders are small farmers and fishermen. They build a barque or brigantine during the winter months to earn some ready money. I have every

confidence their skill will improve with experience. Besides, even at seven years, the craft are cheap enough to make them a profitable investment.”

With a dubious expression on his florid face, Mr. Stokes stroked his impressive side-whiskers. “That’s as may be, sir. We make a pretty penny on the timber and fish they bring over to us. After that, they ship home with empty holds. It ain’t profitable, milord, and it ain’t safe. A ship light in the hold bobs like a cork in rough seas.”

“How do you suggest we address that problem?”

“A three-way trade, milord, instead of back and for’ard. Our ships bring lumber and fish to England, send out mercantile goods to the West Indies, then pick up a cargo of sugar, rum and slaves...”

“Never!” The word reverberated even in the crowded room. Drake pounded his fist on the mattress, but it failed to produce a satisfactory crash. “I will see my enterprises bankrupt before I allow them to turn a ha’penny’s profit from that heinous trade.”

In the instant of silence that greeted his declaration, a brisk clap of hands sounded and Lucy’s voice rang out. “Enough. Have you gentlemen minded the time at all?”

The crowd around his bed parted like the Red Sea to let Lucy make her way to his side. “I’m certain many of you have wives waiting for you at home. It is past time for his lordship’s supper as well. I will not have you upsetting him while he’s recovering from his injuries.”

Drake shifted uncomfortably in his bed. In fact, he hadn’t felt so much as a twinge in days—except his conscience.

Fraud! Malingerer! he silently rebuked himself. His business concerns required his urgent personal attention. Yet here he sat, tucked up snugly in his bed, complaining of phantom headaches and imagined tenderness around his ribs. All so he could continue to bask in the gentle, devoted attendance of Lucy.

She woke him each morning with a cheerful inquiry about how he’d slept and a hearty breakfast of his favorite foods. She scarcely left his side the whole day. They’d compromised over reading matter, putting aside Livy in favor of Dr. Johnson’s *Rasselas*. Even that literary masterpiece did not hold the charm of Lucy’s conversation. Chuckling over the tale of an odious suitor who had plagued her at Bath, Drake realized he’d laughed more in a single fortnight with her than in his whole prior life.

Every night she insisted on sitting with him until he fell asleep. More than once he'd woken from the hellish pit of a nightmare to find himself in the fragrant heaven of Lucy's embrace. When he'd calmed and slipped back into more peaceful repose, he would sometimes rouse again as her soft, warm lips brushed his brow.

Suddenly aware that he'd lapsed into the befuddled grin of a simpleton, Drake composed his features back into proper severity.

"You heard her ladyship's edict, gentlemen." He could not keep a jocular note from creeping into his words. "Even a viscount must submit to wifely tyranny. I will look over the papers you've left and communicate my answers within the next day or two. Don't be shy about making decisions on your own initiative. I am a family man now. It is high time I stepped back from the daily operations of my business concerns."

His sober, hard-headed overseers stared back at Drake as if they'd all been poleaxed in the midriff. Obviously, they were not ready to be cut adrift quite yet. He had a responsibility to them that took precedence over his personal inclinations—no matter how strong.

"Off you go." He waved them on their way. "I'll be on my usual rounds in a week at the latest. Call back again if something urgent arises in the meantime."

They filed out of the room, still looking dazed though somewhat reassured. As Mr. Stokes reached the door, Drake called out to him. "I'm glad you raised the problem of the Nova Scotia ships. You're right about human cargo making good ballast."

Stokes scratched the smooth, bald crown of his head, his heavy brows drawn together in obvious puzzlement. "But if you're so set against shipping slaves...?"

"I would not oppose transporting passengers."

"These is cargo ships, milord," the man objected. "No cabins or other what passengers'll expect."

"Not your high class of passenger, I grant you, but few of that type are anxious to emigrate. It's poor folk who are willing to brave the hardships of a new land for the sake of their children's futures. We can knock together deal bunks, have the people provision themselves and keep our fares low."

"Aye." Stokes' deep-set eyes gleamed with the possibilities. "Even if we only charge a few bob, it beats an empty hold."

"That's the idea." Drake nodded. "Besides, it will mean an increased population in the colonies to provide a growing market

for our commercial goods.”

The overseer beamed. “I’ve said it before, your lordship. Never met a gentleman with your head for trade and that’s a fact. Had it ever since you first walked into my office, a tall spindly boy with hardly a whisker to shave. Now I come to think on it, you’ve scarcely had a day’s rest since then. Don’t rush your recovery. We’ll all muddle along, I daresay, and try not to lose you too much brass doing it.”

Bobbing a parting bow to Lucy, he followed the other managers, closing the door softly behind him. Drake glanced at Lucy to find her gazing at him, clearly deep in thought.

“Why do you work so hard?” she asked. “You have more money than you’ll be able to spend in ten lifetimes... or so I’ve heard.”

Drake shrugged. “A man must do something with his time. I’m not much good at anything else.”

Lucy’s eyes held him. “No need to be flippant with me, Drake Strickland.”

He’d tried to explain to others. Neville, Phyllida, even Jeremy had reacted with amusement and derision. For some reason it bothered Drake inordinately that Lucy might laugh or sneer at his very reason for living.

Some promise of sympathy in her searching gaze pulled the words from him. “You don’t know what it was like here... when I was growing up. Time and again I swore to myself that I would live in spite of what the doctors said. I vowed that when I came into my inheritance, I’d make it my business to help my people feed and clothe their families. Provide their children with a decent education and opportunities for the future.”

“Your people?” Those whispered words flowed as warm and sweet and comforting as a cup of chocolate on a cold day. “I should have known. That’s why you married me, isn’t it? Neville and Reggie will never look out for your people as you do. But a child you raise might carry on as you’ve begun.”

“In part. I also felt a responsibility to you and to the child after the disgraceful way Jeremy used you.”

“Used me?” Lucy’s delicate features went rigid, and her eyes blazed with golden fury. “You make me sound like a handkerchief... or a chamber pot. Jeremy was an honorable man. He loved me, and I adored him. I did nothing against my will to conceive our child. If I had it to do again, I would not hesitate.”

A strangled little cry broke from her lips. Drake ached to take her in his arms and return the comfort she'd offered him time and again. The ferocious anger in her eyes stopped him cold. Somehow of late he'd fooled himself into thinking she belonged to him. Witnessing her distress, he understood that she would always be Jeremy's. He opened his mouth to offer an apology, but she cut him off before he could find the words.

"Don't waste your pity on me, Viscount Silverthorne." She darted for the door. "Save it for *your people*."

Chapter Eleven

LUCY PAUSED IN her eager consumption of a generous slice of Mrs. Maberley's hare-and-partridge pie. Glancing at her down the length of the dining table, Drake began to smile in spite of himself. With Phyllida's departure and the improvement in Lucy's appetite, there had been no further talk of the cook giving her notice.

"What shall we do about Christmas?" Looking up suddenly, Lucy caught him staring at her.

Forcing his budding smile into a scowl, Drake looked away, pretending rapt concentration on his own dinner.

"It's less than a fortnight away," she added in a tone that eloquently expressed her doubt he was aware of the fact.

Drake hesitated, uncertain how he should respond. For the past week he had been studiously weighing his every word around Lucy. After all, his ill-considered remark about Jeremy had cost him the continuation of his pleasant convalescence. The very next morning, he'd risen early and returned to work—something he *was* good at.

"What *shall* we do about Christmas?" Though he affected a casual reply, the very mention of that day made him feel like a woodcock during hunting season.

For reasons he could not fathom, everyone else in the world appeared to regard the Yuletide in a spirit of merriment. Drake had always felt like an outsider. Worse yet, he had the bewildering sense that it was wrong for him to succumb to his loneliness and gloom during such a holy season.

"What I mean is..." Patience warred with asperity in Lucy's voice. "Every family keeps Christmas in its own way. Now that I am part of your family, I must follow your traditions."

"Traditions?" Drake gave a bitter chuckle. "Take your pick. The long-cherished ritual of hiding out on the attic landing to avoid my tutor and his pack of drunken revelers? Or perhaps the merry custom of staying behind at school after all the other boys have left for a holiday?"

Seeing the stricken look on Lucy's face, he checked his outpouring of bile. No use expecting her to understand that he did not begrudge others their merriment. As an employer, he was acclaimed for the generosity of his Christmas box. If a man had

friends and family with whom to celebrate the holiday, Drake had no wish to see it marred by the want of mere money.

All he desired at this time of year was that he be left alone to keep the day in his own quiet manner. Reading the lesson at Christmas matins, worrying down a portion of the enormous goose and plum pudding Mrs. Maberley always prepared then going for a solitary ride so as not to inflict his ill humor on others. On his lonely rounds in the early twilight of winter, if he happened to pause and stare longingly at some homely cottage, straining to catch an echo of tinny music or mildly inebriate laughter, contemplating the elusive mystery of human happiness—whose business was it but his own?

With a jolt, Drake came to himself to find Lucy kneeling beside his chair, her delicate hands clutching the wrist cuff of his coat. “Forgive me, Drake. I should have realized...”

Blast and confound the woman! He scowled. Why must she persist in doing the complete opposite of what he expected? He’d steeled himself against her derision. This sympathy, neither anticipated nor desired, unmanned him in a way he could not bear.

“Get up!” he growled. “Go back and finish your dinner.” He recalled her parting words on the night they’d quarreled over Jeremy. “Save your pity.”

“Very well.” She answered quietly but held her ground. “I prefer to think of it as compassion. There are others who need both yours and mine.”

Though he wanted to repeat his gruff dismissal, curiosity got the better of Drake. He could not trust himself to do more than raise a quizzical eyebrow.

Lucy gave him a searching look. “If you have no cherished Silverthorne Christmas traditions, perhaps we can observe one of my family’s.”

“Feel free to keep Christmas in any way you choose.” Drake shook his arm free with the pretense of returning to his dinner. “Only do not expect me to—”

“High Head.” With those brief words, Lucy interrupted his protest. “I would like us to go there to bring a little Christmas cheer. It has been a difficult year for them and I would like to see for myself how they’re getting on.”

Drake was not sure what he’d expected her to suggest but this certainly was not it. She’d caught him off-guard, again.

“Father and I liked to visit one of the settlements too small to have its own church. Father would hold a service at someone’s house and we would bring food for the Christmas feast. We began the year after Mother died, so we would not sit at home moping about what a poor Christmas we’d have without her.”

“By all means, continue your custom.” Drake’s tone sharpened.

He knew Lucy did not intend her story as an indictment of his own behavior. It gave him a twinge of conscience just the same. While he’d been brooding over a past he could not change, the Rushtons had looked beyond their own sorrow to make Christmas merrier for others. He’d been right all along in his estimation of Lucy—she was a rare creature. Had Jeremy appreciated any of that? Or had the boy not seen beyond her luminous face and lush, inviting bosom?

Having surrendered her hold on his coat, Lucy now grasped Drake’s hand. “You will come then?”

The fine lineaments of her face lit with a glow of anticipation. What impermeable stone must a man’s heart be to deny her anything when she wore such an expression?

Drake steeled his resistance.

“My presence would add nothing to the festivities,” he assured her with curt finality. “You may take my word on it. I have never learned the trick of Yuletide jollity. Go ahead and exhaust the larder and the alehouse, though. Let my meat and drink represent me.”

Scrambling to her feet, Lucy glared at him. “There is more to caring about people than working yourself to death to provide them with a fat wage packet.”

Her wide-set eyes flashed with provocative beauty every bit as compelling as the wistful gaze of supplication she’d turned upon him only moments before.

Drake swallowed an enormous lump that rose inexplicably in his throat.

“Besides, there’s no *trick* to the joy of Christmas.” Her voice softened. “Our Lord came to earth to live as one of the humblest of his creatures so that he might share in our wants and perplexities. To me *that* is a wonder worthy of celebration.”

Somehow Drake sensed she meant more than she was saying but confound him if he could fathom what.

“Very well,” he grumbled. “I’ll come, but I will end up spoiling it for everyone. See if I don’t.”

"I am willing to risk it." A teasing smile twisted one corner of Lucy's bewitching lips. "If you are willing to run the risk that you might enjoy yourself after all."

"Precious little fear of that." Drake permitted himself a faint mordant grin, fleeting as a heartbeat.



Lucy's heart beat queerly as she sat alone in the Silverthorne pew on Christmas morning. It fluttered rapidly high in her chest, leaving her light-headed and breathless. Ridiculous to feel this way, she castigated herself. Jeremy had been dead for nearly four months. To be strictly truthful, in all that time she had not thought much about him. Why, on this of all mornings, had the full weight of his loss descended upon her?

Perhaps because he had spent so little time at Silverthorne in recent years, she reasoned. Until now it had been possible to fancy that he was simply off in London or in Spain with his regiment, apt to show up on leave at any time. But Christmas morning at Saint Mawe's, without Jeremy? Unthinkable!

For more years than she cared to remember, Lucy had huddled in a drafty balcony pew, gazing in adoration at his pure, exquisite profile. That fleeting hour of worship had been the only gift she'd ever asked of Christmas. Now the balcony pew was empty except for the ghost of her timid yearning, and she occupied the spot where Jeremy Strickland would never sit again.

In a daze of renewed grief, she stumbled through the familiar responses in the Book of Common Prayer: sitting, standing, kneeling, bowing her head, moving her lips all by rote. Then Drake strode up to the lectern and began to read the lesson. As head of the family that endowed the vicar's living, reading the lessons was Drake's privilege and duty. In all the years of their acquaintance, distant though it had been, Lucy had never known Drake to shirk his duty. And in all those years, she had scarcely noticed him carrying it out. Certainly never at Christmastime when she'd had eyes only for his handsome young half-brother.

Perhaps it was Jeremy's absence that made her aware of his brother this morning, suddenly and forcefully. Or perhaps it was the consciousness of new life growing within her that made Lucy hear the Nativity lessons charged with deep personal significance.

Whatever the reason, she found herself attending to Drake's reading with rapt concentration.

Lord Silverthorne looked very distinguished in his crisp white surplice, Lucy realized with a bewildering jolt. It set off his fierce dark appearance in a most compelling manner. She had always acknowledged Drake Strickland a powerful man. Unlike expensive finery or the ermine robes of a peer, the stark simplicity of the surplice drove home the realization that his was a power not of wealth or rank but of character and honor.

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God," read Drake in a firm, resonant voice, *"unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth."*

As he continued to read the familiar words from the Gospel of Luke, Lucy pictured the scene vividly in her imagination. Gabriel an eloquent golden angel of manly perfection, announcing to a reverently adoring virgin her privilege and burden to bear the Christ Child. Instinctively, Lucy pressed one gloved hand below the waist of her pelisse. She could not detect the first subtle swelling of her belly under the thick warm velvet.

"Reading from the Gospel of Saint Matthew," announced Drake, breaking in on Lucy's reverie. Glancing up from the pages of the massive Bible, he shot her a swift, piercing look.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: when his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily."

Joseph, that rough, practical workman with his dark looks and yeoman manners. What a contrast to Gabriel! Yet there must have been more to this Nazarene carpenter than first met the eye. For one thing he had been a kind man, just as Saint Matthew called him, reluctant to see poor Mary publicly disgraced. He had done her a matchless service, providing her vulnerable child with an earthly father to protect and nurture him. A special man indeed, entrusted by God with such a task. A task not without its penalties.

"Then Joseph, being raised from sleep," concluded Drake, *"did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: and he knew her not till she had brought forth her first born son, and he called his name Jesus."* Here endeth the reading of the second lesson."

As she watched Drake withdraw from the lectern, a faint sigh

escaped her lips. Had Mary come to appreciate all her husband's fine qualities? Lucy wondered, hoping so. Had she come to love him at last? Or had she clung to the shimmering memory of her brush with an angel?



An angel.

She looked for all the world like an angel, Drake thought as he held out his arms to lift Lucy down from the sleigh. How fitting that those celestial beings should appear in blue and white and gold, a compound of sky, clouds and sunshine. Lucy had wrapped a soft white shawl over the shoulders of her blue pelisse. At the brow and nape of her matching blue bonnet, fine curly tendrils clustered, like filaments of shimmering gold.

His hands closed around her waist, nearly able to span it even through the thick fabric of her pelisse. She felt light in his arms as he eased her to the ground, alarmingly so.

The concern must have shown on his face for Lucy flashed him an encouraging smile. "It won't be as bad as you think, Drake. You'll see."

Scarcely had the words left her lips when she suddenly went limp in his arms.

"Lucy! What is it? Are you all right?" He gathered her up, holding her close to his chest as he had on the night he'd found her weeping in the churchyard.

With a weak apologetic laugh she pressed one gloved hand to her brow. "Just a dizzy spell. I'll be fine." So he alone could hear, she added, "Expectant mothers are prone to them, you know."

The tone of her whispered confidence was warm but for some reason her words chilled Drake. Why had she suddenly seen fit to remind him she was carrying another man's child?

"Oh well, if that's all..." Abruptly he set her back on her feet.

She clung stubbornly to his arm, nodding toward the path. The light snow had been trodden repeatedly underfoot and the resulting slush frozen by the icy upland wind. "It looks slippery." Again she lowered her voice confidentially. "I'm sure you would not want to risk my taking a fall and jeopardizing your future heir."

She cast him a mischievous look, together with a bewitching smile that twined around Drake's heart. "Besides, it's chillier than I

expected. I need you to shield me from the wind.” With a movement as quick and graceful as a dance step, she insinuated herself just under his shoulder.

Instinctively, he placed his arm across her back, crooking around to hold her securely under his wing. Unbidden images flashed in his thoughts. Of that dark hour before dawn when she’d supported his broken frame down from the High Head mine. Now it was his turn to support her.

“There now, I’m warm and safe.” Lucy snuggled tightly against him.

For an instant it occurred to Drake what a slippery emotional incline he was treading in his feelings for this woman. Resolutely, he banished the thought, committed to honoring his promise that he would help her celebrate Christmas.

“Mr. Talbot. Mrs. Maberley,” he called to the cook and butler as they struggled out of their fleece lap robes. “The overseer’s counting house is over there. We’ll leave it to you and the others to prepare for this evening’s festivities while we pay our calls ’round the village.”

“It was so kind of you to offer your help,” piped up Lucy. “I’m certain this will be the most splendid Christmas celebration High Head has ever seen.”

Mrs. Maberley beamed. “My pleasure, your ladyship, I’m sure. I do fancy cooking for a crowd at Christmastime. Puts me in mind of the old days. The puny little geese I’ve roasted the past few years were hardly worth the trouble.”

She shot Drake a look of mild reproof. “Come along, Mr. Talbot,” she fussed at the butler. “I must get a kettle boiling if I’m to steam those puddings proper.”

“We must be on our way too, Drake,” said Lucy, “if we are to pay all our calls and invite everyone to our little revel this evening.”

She peered around at the junior servants, unloading provisions from their small fleet of sleighs. “Now where do you suppose Father is? I thought he meant to come with us.”

“You know what he’s like.” Drake hoped he sounded convincingly innocent. “Got talking to some old dame about her rheumatics and forgot all about us. I vote to be on our way. He’ll catch us up sooner or later.”

To himself, Drake wondered whether his absentminded father-in-law would follow through on their carefully laid plan. If he did,

would Lucy approve? She hadn't shown any sign of disappointment when no presents had been forthcoming at breakfast or luncheon. He might not have given any thought to a gift, if Mrs. Maberley had not posed an innocent question about it. Drake had spent any number of days pondering what he could possibly buy for his wife.

It had finally occurred to him that, unlike the few other women of his close acquaintance, Lucy always appeared happier to give than to receive. In that realization had been born his plan for today. For a solid week afterward he'd been quite useless at business matters, preoccupied with secret visits to shops in Kendal and clandestine conferences with Vicar Rushton. Drake had never approached the Christmas season with such a sense of anticipation. Now that the moment was at hand, he felt a certain misgiving about how Lucy might react.

A shiver went through her, communicating itself to Drake. "Let's be on our way. The wind here makes it feel so much colder than at Silverthorne."

Word must have gone forth of their arrival in the village for they were met at the door of their first stop with a cordial, noisy greeting and speedily drawn inside to sit by the fire and take a cup of mulled cider.

Drake gratefully curled his fingers around a mug, toasty from the introduction of the host's hot poker into the cider. He watched with quiet gravity as Lucy launched into an animated dialogue with the family. She inquired after the soundness of their host's ankle, which he had injured in his brave effort to dig out the trapped miners. The lady of the house she commended on her tireless help at the aid station that night. The children she praised for their size, beauty and cleverness. Basking in the warmth of this exchange, Drake wondered that they needed the cheerfully crackling hearth fire to fend off the winter chill.

While he was savoring the last drop of mellow, spicy cider, the baby of the family staggered over and clung to his knee. A sturdy boy, not yet in trousers, he lavished Drake with a wide, wet smile—all but toothless. Some mysterious impulse prompted Drake to lift the child onto the toe of his boot and bounce him up and down several times. The boy responded with an infectious gurgling chuckle in which Drake joined.

It suddenly occurred to him that in a year's time he might be sporting with a young one of his own. A son to clasp his fingers in a

chubby fist, grin adoringly and call him *Papa*. The thought warmed and intoxicated Drake more thoroughly than his cup of cider. He was scarcely aware of the silence that had fallen in the room.

"Will ye look at that." The child's mother spoke in a tone of hushed wonder. "Our Colly's right strange of folks as a rule. When me own Ma comes, he screws up his eyes and sets to howling the minute she's through the door."

Drake worked hard to keep a sober face. Clearly this wee lad's grandmother was cut from the same cloth as his own.

Ignoring the astonished interest caused by his behavior, the little fellow wriggled up onto Drake's lap. There he settled contentedly, popping a plump thumb into his mouth. Gradually, Drake became aware of Lucy's gaze fixed on him. Her eyes shone with a radiance she must once have turned on Jeremy to beguiling effect. What could it mean? Had the sight of a small child in his arms smitten her with the reality of the one growing within her? Whatever had made her look so, Drake only knew it made him long to kiss her.

Just then a hearty rap sounded on the door and a deep masculine voice boomed from outside the cottage. "Are there any good little boys and girls in this house?"

"Father Christmas!" The children scrambled for the door, fighting good-naturedly for the honor of opening it.

A short portly figure made his way inside. The children clung excitedly to his fur-trimmed red robe, assuring him repeatedly of their impeccable behavior.

"I see I've come to the right place." He patted small heads and shook small hands.

Drake hoped his eager admirers would not tear the beard of brushed fleece from their guest's chin. He caught Lucy scrutinizing Father Christmas with a gleeful grin of recognition. When she cast him a questioning glance, Drake could only avert his eyes sheepishly.

The family exclaimed in loud, appreciative tones over their gifts. Toy soldiers for the oldest son. A daintily painted fan for a girl on the verge of womanhood. Poppets and books for the younger ones. Mother received a pretty work basket and father, a fine leather pouch of tobacco. Master Colly surveyed the scene with suspicious solemnity from his sanctuary on Drake's lap. At last he did condescend to accept a brightly colored spinning top. When his sisters turned it for him, he crowed with delight.

As each gaily wrapped parcel emerged from the bulging pack of Father Christmas, Lucy's smile widened and her eyes grew starrier. A sense of fulfilment swelled in Drake's chest.

It was the same at every house they visited that afternoon—a cordial welcome, modest hospitality, eager greetings for Father Christmas and ardent appreciation of his bounty. After all their calls, the villagers crowded into the counting house for a short service of lessons and carols. If any of the older children saw a likeness between the ruddy little vicar who read the lessons and the jolly figure of Father Christmas, they tactfully refrained from sharing this intriguing information with the little ones.

There followed a merry supper of Mrs. Maberley's best board, crowned by the very choicest of plum puddings. Groaning with repletion, the diners helped to clear the floors for dancing, while mothers spirited their young ones home to bed under the watchful eye of a grandparent or a trusted older child.

Only when they had paused for breath after a succession of spritely line dances was Lucy able to corner Drake for a private word.

"Papa told me you financed his little turn as Father Christmas today," she remarked softly as they stood in the doorway. "I was hoping we could do something like that, but I hadn't the face to ask you after all you've done for me already."

Drake kept his eyes studiously fixed on the dancers. "I was at a loss for a Christmas present to give you."

He shrugged, unable to frame the proper words to explain his intentions. No doubt Jeremy would have found the perfect bauble to delight her and delivered it with the proper gracious flourish. Suddenly his own Christmas surprise seemed to Drake the height of ridiculous sentimentality.

"You needn't have gone to so much trouble," Lucy persisted. "Father told me you got a list of all the villagers from Anthony Brown, with his guess of their ages. He said you haunted the shops for miles around hunting up just the right gifts for everyone."

"I enjoyed it." Drake pretended to spare their conversation only a crumb of his attention. "This is the first year I ever looked forward to Christmas." Try as he might, he could not sound indifferent.

Beside him, Lucy chuckled. "As my Christmas present to you, I promise to refrain from saying, 'I told you so'."

"A rare gift from any wife," Drake quipped wryly, venturing the

dangerous luxury of a sidelong glance at her.

The final notes of the music were fading away. He knew it would be his duty as a good host to take the floor again when the musicians struck up their next tune. Yet he could scarcely bear to break the spell of quiet intimacy between them.

“I could not be better pleased.” Her eyes glittered like tawny gemstones and Drake sensed a tremulous thickness in her voice. “Not if you’d showered me with diamonds. Hearing those children laughing, watching their faces glow... this has been my happiest Christmas ever.”

Before Drake could trust himself to reply, she pointed to the door frame above them. Someone had secured a wilted sprig of mistletoe there. The leaves almost brushed the top of his head. How had he failed to notice it until now?

Lucy reached up and curled one hand around the nape of his neck, drawing his face down to hers with gentle insistence. As she kissed him, Drake held himself severely still. It was a soft kiss, utterly chaste.

For a wondrous instant, Drake felt himself gifted with a treasure of inexpressible sweetness.

Then, as her lips lingered on his, they innocently ignited a flame beneath his long-simmering desire.

Chapter Twelve

HER HAPPIEST CHRISTMAS *ever*.

Had she truly uttered those words? Lucy asked herself as she tossed restlessly in her bed a few nights later. Of course she'd been anxious to assure Drake how much she appreciated everything he'd done on her behalf. Still, to have called a Christmas without Jeremy her happiest was the romantic equivalent of sacrilege.

Yet even after the most rigorous inquisition of her feelings, Lucy could not bring herself to recant the heresy. It had been a rare sweet day, one whose tender magic would linger in her memory for years to come. However, that innocent magic had spawned another kind of enchantment—one dark and potent. Ever since the moment her lips had met his, Lucy had found herself consumed by carnal yearnings for Drake.

As he ate dinner, she followed every motion of his large, deft hands. She imagined how masterfully they might dispatch a woman's clothing in a moment of passion. When he glanced up and catch her gaping, she ducked her head, hoping to conceal the hot blush that mantled her cheeks.

More than once when he was standing close enough to catch her, she had pretended to fall into a swoon. The contradictory sensations of his strong arms enfolding her and the gentle flutter of his breath on her hair made Lucy's whole body tingle with desire. The mere sound of his firm, swift footsteps set her heart racing. What had come over her?

Not love. Of that she was certain. This strange fascination she had suddenly conceived for Drake bore no resemblance to the delicate, dreamy devotion she'd nursed in her heart for Jeremy. Every book she had ever read, every poem, every romantic ballad affirmed that such feelings were true and everlasting—experienced once in a lifetime.

What she felt for Drake was only a physical, sensual interest, like an unquenchable thirst or an itch in that hard-to-reach spot between one's shoulder blades. Persistent. Impossible to ignore. Yet how good it might feel to slake that thirst. To scratch that bedeviling itch.



“Stop scratching yourself, Neville!” snapped his grandmother. “If you will frequent those low taverns and gaming hells I will thank you not to carry their vermin into my house.”

She eyed Neville and Phyllida suspiciously. “You are here for money, I presume. I know better than to expect a call from either of you under any other circumstances.”

“Well, since you mention it...” began Neville.

“Quite the contrary, Grandmama.” Phyllida fetched him a vicious gouge in the ribs with her pointy elbow. “Neville and I are here to wish you greetings of the season.”

“Indeed.” The marchioness rang for tea with a grudging air. “By my calculations, it is nearly Twelfth Night, a trifle late in the Christmas season for the pair of you to be overcome with family feeling.”

Neville prompted Phyllida with an expectant look. This kind of toad-eating was her forte.

“Late? Yes. Well, as a matter of fact...” She groped for a polite excuse. If his own interests had not been at stake, Neville would have enjoyed watching her squirm.

“Drake and his wife!” she declared at last, her pale cheeks flushed with triumph.

“What about them?” The marchioness sounded dubious.

“We were expecting them for Christmas,” replied Phyllida. “Any day. Naturally, Neville and I wanted to wait until we could all celebrate together as a family.”

Just then a maidservant appeared with the tea tray. While his grandmother occupied herself with its disposition, Neville treated Phyllida to a covert grin of approval. She’d managed to placate the old girl, while simultaneously introducing the true reason for their call. Though she might irritate him beyond bearing by times, Clarence’s widow clearly had her uses.

“Drake coming to London of his own volition,” said the marchioness. “Are you certain?”

Phyllida sipped her tea, which was loaded with enough sugar to make Neville’s mouth pucker. “He assured me so himself, just before I returned home. I can’t think what has detained them, though I fear his wife may be behind it.”

“This bride of Drake’s not anxious to get to town?” The

marchioness sounded surprised.

Phyllida sighed. "She tried to pretend she was, but I knew better. I fear the girl has little taste for the kind of company she ought to cultivate. An altogether unsuitable wife for a viscount."

"I see." Her ladyship helped them both to more cake. "Perhaps you'd better tell me how things stand."

As Phyllida gleefully recounted Lucy's indecorous behavior at High Head, Neville watched his grandmother grimly absorb the news. He could scarcely refrain from beaming. The marchioness had been against Drake's marriage from the start. She might make a formidable ally in their quest to bring it down. Still, they must tread carefully, for the old lady had no desire to see him inherit Silverthorne.

"So you see," Phyllida concluded breathlessly, "it is imperative we get the pair of them down to London, so you and I can take Lucy firmly in hand."

"How do you propose we do that?" asked the marchioness. "Drake is unlikely to heed any summons of mine."

"Not a summons, perhaps." Neville bolted a mincemeat pasty. "I doubt he would ignore a letter claiming you were ill and asking to see him."

His grandmother looked long at Phyllida, then at Neville in an enigmatic way that made him fairly break out in a sweat. She might be older than Methuselah, but the old love had her wits about her. Was it possible she divined their scheme?

"Very well," she agreed at last. "I shall dispatch a letter within the week. Though I have my doubts Drake will come, for all that."

Breathing easy for the first time since they'd arrived, Neville summoned enough cheek to ask his grandmother for a drink of something stronger than tea. To his vast surprise, she obliged, and they had an unwontedly convivial visit for a further hour.

As they departed, Phyllida whispered to Neville, "I'll send my own letter to elaborate on Grandmama's. I fear she may not lay it on thick enough."

Neville nodded his approval. "We don't want to take any chances."

From the window of her sitting room, the marchioness watched them go.

What were they talking about? She wondered.

It did not take an oracle to divine they were up to something.

What could it be?



Drawing his eyebrows into a stern frown of concentration, Drake poured over the company ledgers in Harold Stokes's Ullswater counting house. For the first time he could recall, the meticulous columns of figures meant nothing to him. Ordinarily, he could glance over a page and spot a missing farthing or project revenues for the next quarter. Today he did not trust himself to sum one and one.

"Some'ut wrong sir?" Stokes leaned back against the low windowsill, eyeing him with paternal concern.

In the early years of their association, when he'd been no more than a lanky boy with a nose for trade and a burning need to prove himself, Drake had appreciated his shipping manager's respectful deference. As he'd moved from one commercial triumph to another, their relationship had undergone a subtle shift.

"Wrong?" Drake stiffened. "Of course not. I'm anxious to get back in the traces after all that Christmas nonsense." He peered at the entry for dry dock expenses, hoping by sheer dint of concentration to wrest some meaning from the bald number.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. Stokes take a long ruminative draw on his pipe, then blow the smoke out the side of his mouth in one long sustained stream.

"What you did at High Head this Christmas weren't nonsense," he muttered gravely. "Show a man you give a damn about him and his family, that he's not just another name in the wage ledger. He'll pay you back with the kind of loyalty brass can't buy. You mark me—when that mine at High Head gets back into production, it'll be more profitable than you can imagine. Those men will break their backs digging that coal out for you and all because you brought smiles to their children's faces."

"That's what Lucy said." It surprised Drake to find himself musing aloud.

"A good head on her shoulders has your wee missus." Harold Stokes chuckled. "A strong backbone to boot, no mistake. I could see it that the day she tossed us all out of Silverthorne on our arses, because she reckoned we were tiring you out."

All Drake could manage in reply was a sickly grin. He did not

dispute Mr. Stokes's admiring assessment of his wife. She certainly did have a good head and a strong backbone. Those were not the physical attributes that had come to preoccupy him until he could no longer concentrate on his work or get a sound night's sleep.

With the earlier rigors of her pregnancy past, Lucy had recently blossomed like a sweet, wild rose. Fortunately, the high-waisted gowns currently in fashion would hide the most obvious sign of her condition for a few months yet.

Ever since Christmas, when he'd first tasted her kiss, Drake had often found his gaze lingering upon Lucy, tantalized by the enticing feminine sway of her walk. He did not dare to indulge in such behavior when she was facing him. If he'd chanced to let his eyes dwell on the honeyed sunshine of her hair, the ripe sweetness of her lips, or the gentle swell of her bosom, his face might have betrayed the wistful hunger that threatened to devour him. His tongue might have lolled out like poor starving hound's.

Even in the sterile atmosphere of the counting house, such thoughts made his body ache for her.

"You've been in the bliddy *traces* a sight too long," Mr. Stokes interrupted Drake's provocative fancies. "Broke to the yoke young, you might say. You had no chance to sow your wild oats and enjoy a bit of fun."

"Fun?" Drake repeated the word as if it were a vulgarity. "In my experience, that is an innocent-sounding title for all manner of dissipation and vice. I assure you I have never felt I was missing out on anything worthwhile by applying myself to my duty."

"Duty's a fine ideal," Mr. Stokes conceded. "The world would be a better place if more folks attended to theirs. But there's all kinds of pleasure in the world too, and not all of it's a sin. I reckon the secret of a good life is striking the right balance between duty and pleasure. A bit like baking a cake. Too rich with butter, eggs and spices and it's hard on the digestion. Leave them out, and it's scarcely worth eating."

This bit of sage advice was leavened with such obvious respect, even affection, that Drake could not bring himself to resent the unwarranted intrusion upon his privacy.

"I had no idea you were such a philosopher, old friend. How would you suggest I go about seasoning this stale cake of mine?"

Looking much relieved that Drake had not taken offense at his unsolicited counsel, Mr. Stokes took several short puffs on his pipe.

His grin stretched the considerable width of his broad face. "Well, since you asked..."

Both men laughed.

"I'd say you should spend every spare minute with that fetching lass you've wed. Soon enough she'll have a nursery full of young Stricklands to keep her occupied, I shouldn't wonder. Enjoy this time while there's only the two of you."

Drake felt his features freeze into a tight smile that no longer reflected his mood. There was no such unit as Lucy and him, only the two of them. From the very beginning there had been a third in their marriage—the unborn child, vicariously representing his father.

Even that was not quite accurate, Drake reflected bitterly. He was the third party in the triangle. The interloper. The intruder. An unsatisfactory substitute for the man Lucy wanted by her side and in her bed. The very thought of claiming his place in Lucy's bed roused Drake's body anew, which he resented bitterly. He was a begrudged guest at a feast. Not only forbidden to taste the delicacies arrayed before him, he must not touch, smell or even look.

"Take her off to Brighton or Bath for the winter," Mr. Stokes continued, oblivious to the change in Drake's mood. "Enjoy a bit of society. Your overseers have had a taste of running the operations without you. They can manage for a month or two. Trade always slows in the winter anyway."

"I suppose..." Drake ventured. Perhaps it would do the two of them good to get away from Silverthorne, crammed to the rafters with reminders of Jeremy. "I have a notion to put in an appearance at the House of Lords to remind our noble peers what their accursed American blockade is costing this country, particularly those who work for a living."

"Capital, lad! Mark me, though. If you mean to go, do it soon. We've had a mild winter so far, but it'll only take one bad storm and who knows but you might be stranded here 'til spring." Mr. Stokes leaned forward to pat him on the arm. "Now quit pretending you see anything worthwhile in that ledger and come join me for a quick pint before you head back to Nicholthwait."

As Drake rode home from Ullswater in the gathering winter twilight, doubts began to nag at him.

London? For years he had avoided the city, concluding his

business on each infrequent trip as swiftly as possible. He'd taken little part in the social doings of his fellow aristocrats, no matter how numerous and insistent the invitations. What man in his right mind would put himself out to be stalked by ambitious mamas, eager to foist their reluctant daughters upon him? Furthermore, Drake had no inclination to expose his painfully inadequate social skills to the derision of people who placed such a high value on eloquence and charm.

Exchanging a desultory greeting with Talbot upon his return to Silverthorne, Drake wandered off to his rooms to bathe and change for dinner. As he went through the motions of his toilette, he continued to ponder the problem. Even if he could reconcile himself to wintering in London, how would he persuade Lucy?

It was only when he glanced at his mail that the answer became obvious.



"Mr. Talbot?" Lucy intercepted the butler on the way to her rooms to dress for dinner. "Please inform me when his lordship returns." She clutched a crumpled letter tightly in one hand. "There is a matter of some urgency I would—"

"The master's home, Madam." Talbot managed to blurt out this announcement when Lucy paused to gasp a breath. "Has been for nearly a half hour. I expect he'll be having his bath at the moment."

"I see." Lucy could feel herself blush an agonizing shade of scarlet. "In that case, I suppose it must wait until dinner."

As Talbot drifted almost silently toward the stairs, Lucy took a few tentative steps in the direction of her rooms. Once the butler was out of sight, she darted back down the corridor toward the east wing. Not a single second's reflection crossed her mind as she hurried down the dimly lit gallery. Some unknown force animated her, propelling her against her will—certainly against her better judgment.

On the threshold of her husband's bedchamber she hesitated at last. Her rational self began to protest her mindless, instinctive actions. What did she hope to accomplish by interrupting Drake in the middle of his bath? She was about to turn away when she noticed his door was slightly ajar. All sensible inhibitions drowned in a ravenous wave of curiosity.

Holding her breath, Lucy peeped through the slender gap between door and jamb. Her husband's bedchamber lay in darkness. Only a soft flicker of firelight illuminated the dressing room beyond. It was more than sufficient to show Lucy what she longed to see. Perhaps due to the colder weather, the bathing tub had been set near the hearth directly in her narrow line of vision.

Wisps of steam rose from the bathwater as Drake bent forward, splashing a palmful of it on his face. He shook the wetness from his hair and side-whiskers, like a lithe, lean hound. Abruptly, he rose out of the water—naked as Adam. Lucy drew in a sharp gasp of air. All her senses reeled at the sight.

Water sluiced over the long, taut muscles of his flank. The last drops slid more slowly, in a sinuous caress that Lucy's fingertips ached to trace. As he turned slightly toward her, she could see the beads of moisture glistening on his chest. They clung to the dark, curly thatch matted between two bronze buds. With reluctant anticipation she let her gaze slip lower. Following the crease of fine black hairs that started below his navel, it trailed down to the dense nest at the apex of his hard, lean thighs.

Before she could properly contemplate the rest, Drake grabbed a towel from the back of a nearby chair. He began to rub himself dry with quick, vigorous strokes.

With a start, Lucy came to her senses. She shrank from the brooding rapacity that surged within her as she'd watched Drake. She wanted him—at least her traitorous body did. Wanted him with a deep, savage need she had never felt for any other man. Not even Jeremy.

No!

She'd sworn fidelity to Jeremy's memory. Even if she hadn't, Drake Strickland was the last man for whom she dared entertain such desires. Lucy wrenched her gaze from the alluring, disturbing sight of his bare body. Turning away, she fled back down the gallery as though the hounds of hell were baying at her heels.



Lucy sensed the new intensity which charged his feelings for her, Drake could tell. Judging by her manner, it was obvious she did not approve the change. During the first three courses of dinner, Lucy had scarcely ventured a word. Accustomed as he'd grown to letting

her lead their table talk, Drake had no idea how to broach the subject of London. The silence between them spread almost imperceptibly, like the thin, brittle ice of late autumn that crept out from the shores of Mayeswater.

Whenever he glanced up at her, she appeared determined to avoid his eyes. Drake wished for all the world that Dr. Varoy or Lucy's father had been able to accept their invitations to dinner that evening. Unfortunately, there'd been an outbreak of diphtheria in a poorer section of the village. Both the physician and the vicar had been summoned. Drake could not help feeling like a general charging into battle with his battalion deserting in droves behind him.

He fortified himself with an ungentlemanly swig of his wine.

"See here, my dear."

"Drake, I have a great favor to ask."

Their abruptly blurted words clashed in the echoing stillness of the dining room.

They both began to laugh. Drake liked the harmony of their voices mingled in mirth. High, clear and sweet, Lucy's laughter trilled a pleasant counterpoint to his own deep chuckle, somewhat rusty from disuse. Holding up his hand to claim the right of first speech, he felt inordinately pleased when Lucy met his eye without glancing skittishly away.

"Name your favor."

She did look away then, biting her lip in a manner Drake took to betray nervousness. "I have had a letter from Lady Phyllida today, coaxing us to come down to London while the weather holds. She says your grandmother is ill."

"That part is true enough," Drake replied. "I have a message from Grandmother, herself. She makes light of her ailment but I can read between the lines. Would you mind terribly if we did go to London? Grandmother and I did not part on the best of terms and she is getting on in years."

"Of course we must go." Relief infused Lucy's words, but also an anxious catch, both of which Drake was at a loss to explain.

"Very well, then. Start packing. We are for London."

"I suppose we will have to stay with Lady Phyllida." Lucy's nose wrinkled expressively.

"I can't say I care for the prospect, myself. It would look rather odd for us to rent premises when I already own the house on

Grafton Square. Once we get there, I expect Phyllida will waste no time trying to pit us against one another again. When I think of all her mischief-making this fall, I would dearly love to repay in kind."

Leaning back in his chair, Drake sipped his wine, mulling over the possibilities. As one particularly amusing notion developed, a slow smile rippled across his lips.

"You've thought of something?" Lucy prompted him.

"Perhaps, but I would need your cooperation to affect it."

Amber merriment danced in Lucy's wide brown eyes. "If you can guarantee it will vex Lady Phyllida, I am your creature."

"Don't foreswear yourself until you hear what I have in mind," Drake cautioned her. "My cousin appears intent on sowing strife between us. Therefore, I doubt anything would gall her more than to see us billing and cooing like a besotted pair of turtle doves. I propose we play the adoring newlyweds, fawning over each other in a manner quite sickening to behold. What do you say to my idea? Are your acting skills equal to the enterprise?"

Chapter Thirteen

WERE HER ACTING skills equal to playing Drake's love-struck bride? That question resonated in Lucy's thoughts as she stared out the window of the barouche at the rolling Derbyshire countryside. She stole a quick glimpse at Drake seated opposite her. Perhaps a more apt question was whether she could continue to feign indifference for a man whose physical presence captivated her more with each passing day.

At least in London there would be welcome distractions. That was the chief reason she'd urged him to make the journey—she needed every distraction available. Her shocking behavior spying on Drake as he rose from his bath had convinced her that she could not trust herself alone with him at Silverthorne.

Besides, London society might not be so terrifying after all. Not if the rest of the *ton* treated her as graciously as their hosts of the past several nights. To break their long journey south, they had stopped along the way to visit with relatives of Drake's. They were now an hour from Chedworth, where the young Duke of Derbyshire had made them most warmly welcome.

As if her silent musings had somehow communicated themselves to Drake, he spoke up. "I should never have let young Derbyshire press us to stay that extra day. They will be looking for us at Anstice and Prees and Blenheim—all down the line. I don't care much for the looks of that sky, either."

Thick slate-gray clouds brooded menacingly over the Derbyshire peaks and a few tiny flakes danced on the gusts of biting upland wind. Drake's expression looked equally grim, though Lucy could not fathom why. He'd begun their visit at Chedworth amiably enough, but his mood had deteriorated hourly. By the time they took their leave, his brusque farewell mortified Lucy.

"Surely, you can't hold His Grace to blame for the weather?" She wondered why the duke had bothered to extend his hospitality to such an ungracious guest.

"Of course, I don't blame him for the weather." Drake sounded every bit as impatient with her as she was with him. "Only for detaining us."

"I should never mind being detained in such charming company

and such splendid surroundings,” Lucy retorted.

Drake made no reply for fully a quarter of an hour. The time felt much longer to Lucy. Silence swelled between them, punctured only by the muted tread of the horses and the rattle of the carriage.

Finally, Drake reached over and rubbed a patch of frost from the carriage window. “You appeared quite as taken with the master as with his house.”

He peered out the circle of glass he had cleared.

Even from her seat opposite Drake, Lucy could see the snow falling at an alarming rate. “As well I might be. Chedworth is among the finest houses in England. The duke is a charming gentleman and an attentive host. What a pity he’s had to come into the responsibilities of his title at such a young age.”

“Harrumph!” Drake’s expressive dark brows knit together in a look of mingled vexation and concern. “The boy is a good five years older than I was when I came into my inheritance. The Derbyshire estate is also considerably more solvent than my father left Silverthorne. Not that I have much confidence of it remaining that way.”

“Nonsense,” said Lucy before she could stop herself. The young Duke had put her much in mind of Jeremy with his graceful compliments and subtle gallantries. His company had temporarily eased her foolish infatuation with Drake. She would not stand by and listen to anyone disparage him.

Drake looked away from the window, staring her intently in the eye for the first time in several days. “Give me credit for understanding finances at least. All that talk of renovations to the estate—a new wing for the house, improving the grounds, fountains. No fortune is bottomless. Mark my words—he’ll end up selling some of those fine pictures to pay for his extravagance.”

“Drake Strickland, I do believe you’re jealous.” She was lying, of course—she believed no such thing. Somehow, though, she sensed it would put him on the defensive.

“Jealous? Me? Of that pup, Derbyshire?” Drake looked as if he wanted to storm away indignantly. If they had been dining at Silverthorne instead of driving along some country lane in Derbyshire, perhaps he would have. “Now who’s talking nonsense?”

“Jealous,” Lucy repeated, compelled for reasons she could not fathom to goad him into a display of passion—if only a passionate denial. “You cannot stand anyone making an unfavorable

comparison between Chedworth and your beloved Silverthorne. Such a ridiculous attitude. Silverthorne needs take second place to no other house in the kingdom.”

As the words left her lips, Lucy knew they were true. When they had taken their leave of Nicholthwait, she'd been so absorbed with apprehension about their journey that she'd scarcely spared a thought to how much she would miss Silverthorne. An unexpected pang of homesickness seized her.

“I have no interest in squandering my fortune on a showplace,” said Drake, “traipsed through by every Tom, Dick and Harry with sixpence to tip the housekeeper.”

No sooner had he spoken than the barouche ground to a dead halt. Above them, Lucy heard a volley of anxious shouting between the coachman and the footmen.

Reaching up, Drake gave a peremptory rap on the ceiling of the coach. “Hallo! What’s going on out there?”

Lucy heard the driver scramble down from his perch. A few seconds later there came a polite tap on the carriage door. When Drake swung it open, Lucy gasped at the sight outside. The sky, the hills and the road were all an indistinguishable blur of whiteness. Lucy could scarcely see the coachman’s blue livery beneath an overcoat of snow. On the top of his hat, flakes had accumulated to a height of several inches.

“What’s all the commotion out there?” demanded Drake.

“Begging your pardon, milord.” The man bobbed his head sending a flurry of snowflakes cascading from the top of his hat. “We’ve overshot our turnoff for Anstice, missed it in the snow. This bit of road we’re on is getting worse by the minute.”

“Where are we exactly?” Drake squinted against the glare from the snow as he peered out the carriage door.

“Not certain, milord. This might be the Nottingham road.”

“I’ll wager there’s not an inn or house of any consequence between here and Nottingham.” Drake muttered. “Stranded in Sherwood Bloody Forest.”

“Wouldn’t care to push the horses more than another mile in weather like this milord,” said the coachman. “We did pass an inn half a mile back. With luck we might make it there before the carriage lands in a ditch or the horses give out.”

“Very well.” Drake sounded reluctantly resigned. “No sense lolling about on the open road when we can weather the storm

under cover.”

“Very good, milord.” The coachman looked to be drawing his first easy breath in hours.

“You were right,” said Lucy as Drake pulled the carriage door closed. “We should not have lingered at Chedworth in January without expecting to pay the price. We should have pressed on for London while the weather held.”

Drake shrugged. “What’s done is done.”

“It may not be so bad.” She tried to ease the anxious tension she read in his eyes. “A country inn can scarcely compare with Chedworth for accommodations, but I expect we can bear anything for a night or two.”

Drake looked ready to agree with her. Before he could say so, the barouche lurched backward sending Lucy sprawling into his arms. An instant of heart-pounding shock gave way to equally heart-pounding arousal. His side-whiskers caressed her cheek. Her nostrils flared to inhale his scent. Time slowed for her, drawing out each frantic heartbeat and each erratic breath over many minutes. Tentatively, she began to move her lips across the sharp-hewn plane of his cheek, questing toward his mouth.

“Lucy, are you all right?” Clutching her upper arms, Drake pushed her away depositing her on the seat beside him. The coach was listing badly back and to the left. “We must have dropped a wheel into the ditch trying to get turned around. Are you hurt? You’ve gone white as the snow.”

“Just startled, that’s all.” She struggled to regain the tiniest measure of her composure.

“If you’re sure,” said Drake. “The men can probably use my help with the horses.”

The shrill sound of frightened whinnying confirmed his guess.

“I’m fine.” Lucy waved him away. “Go.”

Alone in the carriage, she could hear the men calling sharply to one another while the horses continued to protest. The barouche rocked forward and backward several times. Lucy braced herself against this buffeting. It scarcely compared to the emotional tempest that raged within her. She’d been wrong to claim she could stand anything for a day or two.

She could scarcely stand a second or two in Drake’s arms without surrendering her self-control.



"I'm afraid this is the best our innkeeper could do." Drake pushed open the door to a tiny gable room so Lucy could enter. "The maidservant usually sleeps here," he continued apologetically. "When she heard me pleading with her master for lodgings, she offered to let us have it."

Since there was nowhere else in the room to sit, Lucy sank down on the narrow corner bed, while Drake shrugged himself out of his sodden greatcoat and hung it on a peg beside the door.

Cramped, drafty and of dubious cleanliness, even the servants quarters of an indifferent inn provided a welcome haven from the blizzard outside. As he'd struggled to coax the horses on in the teeth of a howling wind, Drake had almost despaired of reaching shelter. He had driven them on, driven himself by a compelling need to protect Lucy and her child.

When they finally stumbled into the courtyard of the remote country inn numb with cold and fatigue, Drake thought he had never seen a more welcome sight. Of sturdy lathe-and-beam construction, the modest old manor house easily dated from Tudor times, if not earlier.

His relief soon gave way to dismay upon finding *The Black Cygnet* stuffed to the rafters with other guests, also seeking refuge from the storm. When begging and blustering did not move the landlord, Drake had commenced to bribe. An outrageous sum in gold sovereigns changed hands before their party received a belated welcome.

Lucy sniffed the air. "I wonder what there is to eat? I'm famished."

"So am I. A more apt question is what might be *left* to eat? I'll wager this inn is housing more guests at the moment than in the past month."

A most unladylike growling issued from Lucy's stomach. She groaned.

"I will eat anything—bread and drippings. What I wouldn't give for a taste of last night's dinner leavings from Chedworth."

"Chedworth! Of course!" Drake's spirits buoyed. "Derbyshire's cook packed us a hamper for the road. I'll go fetch it before someone else gets hold of it."

"While you're gone, I'll try to hunt us up a candle." Lucy's

stomach gurgled again even more insistently than before, which set them both laughing.

“Be as quick as you can,” she begged.

Drake managed to lay hands on the hamper, blessedly unmolested. Finding it well-provisioned, he parceled out some of its bounty to his grateful coachman and footmen. They had found sleeping quarters in the inn’s taproom. By the time Drake arrived back in their small chamber Lucy had secured a candle. It flickered precariously as a chill draft whistled in the chinks around the window casement. The sound made Drake shiver.

“For so small a cupboard, it’s not exactly snug, is it?” He set the hamper down beside the bed and bent to inspect the casement. “I doubt this window’s been properly caulked since the Restoration.”

“We can worry about that later.” Lucy rummaged through the hamper, pausing now and then to exclaim over its bounty. “His Grace’s cook must have meant to provision us all the way to London. Here’s some of that Derbyshire cheese... and dried apples... half a pudding. We’ll have to eat that straight away. See here, Drake. I managed to wheedle a little kettle of hot water. This looks like... why, yes it is... a box of tea.”

Sitting on the bed tucking ravenously into Chedworth dainties, they laughed over the day’s misadventures. Somehow the food tasted better than it had on the previous evening, piping hot and served on bone china in the Duke’s formal dining room. Tonight Drake had Lucy all to himself—a luxury he basked in.

After they’d eaten their fill, Lucy repacked the hamper with enough to last them several days more. Meanwhile Drake stuffed the cracks around the casement with strips of linen torn from one of the napkins. The muted sound of lusty singing rose from the taproom below.

Drake and Lucy exchanged smiles. “It doesn’t sound as though the men will get much sleep tonight.”

Amusement twinkled in Lucy’s eyes. “When it does come, I expect it will be a very sound sleep indeed.”

“I hope their racket won’t keep you awake. I know it’s early yet, compared to the hours we kept at Chedworth. If candles are as scarce as everything else around here, we should conserve this one by turning in for the night.”

“I suppose you’re right.” A strange, wistful look momentarily crossed Lucy’s face. “Try not to match your servants drink for drink,

if you please.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You *are* planning to sleep downstairs with the men aren’t you? I thought you said this was the very last room available.”

“So it is.” Drake pulled his greatcoat from the peg where it had been hanging. Though still a trifle damp, it would serve. He threw it around his shoulders. “However, there’s nothing like a lock on this door. Not that it would do much good on such a flimsy bit of board. I have no intention of leaving you alone here all night.”

Seeing her cheeks suffuse with color, he added brusquely, “Don’t worry. I’ll roll up in my coat and sleep on the floor.”

Licking his thumb and forefinger, he quickly snuffed the candle.

Out of the darkness Lucy spoke. She sounded different now that he could not see her—the pitch of her voice high and thin. “If you think I intend to let you sleep on that cold, hard floor, think again, Drake Strickland. Your broken ribs may not have knit completely. You must have put a strain on them today pushing our carriage out of the ditch and leading the horses.”

“I’ve recovered.” Drake eased himself to the floor. In truth, he could feel his muscles beginning to stiffen. The site of his injury gave a twinge.

Tentative, shuffling footsteps came nearer until...

“Dash it, woman! Do you mean to break my ribs again, kicking me in the back?”

“If you hadn’t snuffed the candle in such a hurry...” Lucy grasped his arm forcefully. “Up with you. I don’t intend to take no for an answer. If you must sleep in this room, we will share the bed. It might keep us both from freezing.”

“If you’re cold, I can hunt you up a spare blanket,” Drake offered. “That pallet hardly looked big enough for one, much less two.”

“I can assure you, there is not a spare blanket to be had in this establishment tonight at any price. I asked while I was after the candle and the water. The landlord laughed in my face. As for size, I do not take up much room. For all your length, you aren’t very broad. Provided you don’t thrash about in your sleep, we should manage well enough. You needn’t fear for your virtue on my account. I give you my word I won’t transgress upon your person.”

She was laughing at him, the little minx! Drake could hear it in her voice. If only she knew. It was not the possibility of her transgression that worried him, but his own. Could he abide the

temptation of spending a whole night in her bed without succumbing to his desires?

Suddenly the exertions of the day overtook him. He yawned deeply. Easing himself down, he began to pry the Hessians off his cold, stiff feet.

"I'm glad you've decided to be sensible." Lucy sounded amazed that he'd given in with so little struggle. "What say we spread your greatcoat and my manteau over this thin counterpane?"

They spent a few awkward minutes trying to find a workable sleeping position. They ended up lying on their sides like two spoons in a silver chest. Drake faced out, his knees tucked up due to the shortness of the bed while Lucy snuggled at his back.

Much to his surprise, he did not lie awake throbbing with passion for her. That came in the next morning when he woke to find her arm draped over his hip, her limp hand poised tantalizingly over the front of his breeches.



If Lucy had needed any further proof of Drake's indifference, his behavior the next morning would have convinced her beyond doubt. While she lay there, wrapped in a deep doze that followed a restless night, he leapt up as if he'd been doused with ice water.

"Morning already?" He danced clumsily around the room on one foot trying to force the other into his boot. "It must be true what they say—if a man is tired enough, he can sleep anywhere."

Lucy slid over to the patch of the thin lumpy mattress that was still warm from Drake's body.

"I congratulate you," she grumbled sarcastically pulling the pile of blankets and coats around her. "I wish I could say the same. Now, *if* you will oblige me, I would like to keep my eyes closed awhile longer."

"Please yourself." Drake retrieved the kettle from the floor. "With such a crowd here, there will likely be considerable competition for breakfast, hot water and everything else. I mean to be the early bird."

"Enjoy your feast of worms." Lucy rolled over, pointedly turning her back on him.

After he left on his errands, she heaved a deep sigh of relief. Never in her life had she spent so unsettled a night! Huddled

against Drake's back feeling the gentle rhythm of his breathing, she'd greedily soaked up his warmth. Even through the many layers of clothing they both wore, she could feel the firm lean strength of his body.

Over and over she relived the most intimate moments of their otherwise chaste marriage. Gazing hungrily at his naked body, steaming from the bath. Touching his bare chest while tending his injuries. Claspng him to her bosom in a pitch-dark mine shaft. With each memory her physical yearning for him had grown. A queer tingling ache, it had pulsed in her wrists, at her throat and in the sensitive tips of her breasts. It throbbed most insistently at the apex of her thighs straining in vain for some relief.

Only twice had she lain with a man and the two encounters could not have been a greater contrast. Burrowed under musty bedclothes in this chilly little room, Lucy found it almost impossible to imagine the sun-dappled glade where Jeremy had made love to her. It had been like a rosy, lyrical dream, one from which she'd awakened with brutal abruptness.

She'd traded that luminous illusion for a far harsher reality, clinging desperately to a man who promised safety, even warmth. One who turned his back on her at every opportunity, leaving her cold and alone. Why? Lucy asked herself yet again. Why had Jeremy's tender, eloquent seduction failed to rouse the tempestuous desire that Drake went out of his way to discourage?

Last night it had taken all her restraint to keep from slipping her hand beneath his shirt and making the intimate acquaintance of his bare torso with her fingertips. Lucy shuddered to imagine Drake's reaction if he'd woken to find her fondling him. No doubt he would have hauled her out of bed by the hair and subjected her to a summary lecture on the sin of wanton lust.

Though he protested otherwise, she knew he considered her a scarlet woman for having conceived a child out of wedlock. If not, why did he shy away or lash out in righteous wrath whenever she tried to draw close to him? She could not afford to alienate the man any further. Her child's future depended on it.

How was she supposed to stand another night in this tiny room with him, without falling prey to her reckless urges? She must concentrate on Jeremy, Lucy decided at last. Think about him. Talk about him. Encourage Drake to talk about him. Perhaps his gallant spirit would help to subdue the licentious demons that threatened

to overpower her.

Booted footsteps sounded in the corridor, coming to a halt before the door. With a light tap, Drake called through, "Are you decent?"

That, she reflected with a wry grimace, was a highly debatable question. "I am still in bed, if that's what you're wondering. I am decently covered, however. You may enter."

Enter he did, flashing a triumphant grin and bearing a squat iron brazier. "This may ward off the worst of the cold, if I can scavenge enough coal to fuel it."

He set it in the corner farthest from the bed then began to ferry other items in from the hallway.

"This shouldn't take up much room." He slid in a small trunk, part of their luggage from the barouche. "It can double as a seat or a table. You might find a change of clothes in it."

Though she knew very well it contained only her undergarments and nightclothes, Lucy did not say so.

After the trunk came a kettle, steam rising from its spout. A dented but serviceable enamel basin followed, along with the lap robes from the carriage.

"I let the men have these, last night." He piled the heavy robes at the foot of the bed. "I fear my charity was misplaced. They assured me this morning that the taproom was quite snug. A few mugs of mulled ale can keep a man as warm as any blanket."

Lucy had never heard Drake rattle on like this. She was not sure what to make of the forced heartiness in his voice, either. It made her uneasy.

Emerging from her carapace of coats and blankets, she surveyed his modest bounty. "A profitable expedition I see."

She set the basin on top of the trunk then poured a frugal measure of hot water from the kettle. "Has the cold lessened since last night, or have I just grown used to it?"

Drake peered out the tiny latticed window. "The wind has veered to the southwest and turned our falling snow to rain. If it keeps up, we might be able to escape this place in another day or two."

He could not disguise the eagerness in his voice, if he was even trying.

"The sooner the better," Lucy muttered under her breath. With a day's growth of dark whiskers not yet shaven, Drake looked dangerously attractive. Better they should be on their way, lodging in stately houses that afforded the civilized amenity of separate

quarters for a husband and wife.

Desperate to distract herself from the thought of spending another night in bed with Drake, Lucy splashed a palmful of rapidly cooling water on her face. "Tell me about Jeremy. What was he like as a boy?"

Drake wheeled sharply from the window. "I didn't get to see much of him when he was a small child. I was away at school." His voice took on a well-honed edge. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason." Lucy shrugged, trying to keep her tone convincingly casual. "I worshipped him from afar for so long, but I was close to him for such a short time. Is it not natural that I should want to know about the father of my child? You are the only person who can supply me with that information. Anyone else might grow suspicious of my questions."

Anxious to divert attention from her true motives, she demanded, "Did your school have no holidays, that you could not spend time with your only brother?"

"Oh, we had holidays. I never got invited to pass them in London." Almost to himself he added, "My stepmother had little use for me."

All that long dull day as rain melted snow on the Derbyshire hills, Lucy persisted in questioning Drake about his brother. Whenever she ran out of questions, she fell back on recounting the story of her brief courtship with Jeremy. As a distraction from her unchaste desires, it proved a mixed success at best.

Chapter Fourteen

PERHAPS BECAUSE SHE'D exhausted herself during the previous wakeful night, Lucy fell asleep before the press of Drake's body overwhelmed all her scruples. Now it was his turn to writhe on the rack of desire.

Heightening his torture was their state of undress. The weather had turned mild and the glowing coals in the brazier further warmed the room. There had been no excuse for them to sleep fully clothed. Extracting a nightgown from her little trunk, Lucy had told her husband to turn his back while she changed for bed. Once he doused the light, Drake reluctantly shed his stock, breeches and boots to sleep in his long shirt.

Now the blasted garment kept riding up, exposing his bare backside to the occasional brush of Lucy's hand, a sensation that roused him unbearably. Even through the fine linen of his shirt, he could feel the warmth of her breath every time she exhaled. His own breath came faster. But the most exquisite torment was the soft, steady pressure of her deliciously ripe bosom at the base of his rib cage.

How he longed to turn and bury his face in the cleft between her breasts, filling his nostrils with the lush feminine scent of her. His hands ached to explore every delectable inch of her body. His palate craved the intoxicating nectar of her lips. By daybreak, when he could stand it no longer, he was quite delirious with need.

To what end? He could suffer, bleed... even perish for want of her. Lucy had made it abundantly clear that she preferred his dead brother to any man alive. Especially him.

She had never talked about Jeremy so much as during the past day. Perhaps he had been constantly in her thoughts all these weeks, but she'd refrained from discussing him within earshot of the Silverthorne servants. Since that impediment had been removed, she'd shown Drake where her heart lay—where it would always lay.

In the most secret depths of his own heart, had he cherished a preposterous hope that she might forget Jeremy eventually and turn to him? If so, he'd been a pathetic fool! Drake berated himself as he hastily dressed in the feeble light of a grey winter dawn. Had

twenty-five years taught him nothing? There wasn't a soul in the world who had not preferred his handsome, engaging half-brother to him. Beginning with their father... and ending with their son, no doubt. Somehow Drake knew, with bitter foresight, that no matter how diligently he toiled to nurture Lucy's child, the boy would inevitably come to venerate the memory of his supposed uncle.

Stealing out of the inn, Drake walked aimlessly for several hours in a cold mist, until his fevered body felt blessedly numb. Returning to *The Black Cygnet* past noon, he joined the company in the taproom, determined to quench the last embers of his passion for Lucy with the landlord's potent cider.

But as any wise man knows, spirits only fuel a blaze.



The candle sputtered to a fitful demise in a puddle of molten wax. The room plunged into darkness except for the last embers glowing in the brazier. With a sigh Lucy acknowledged the obvious. Drake had chosen to abandon her for the night in favor of more congenial company.

She'd been sick with worry, after waking to find him gone, when there had been no sign of him by midday. Gazing out the window, she happened to spot him returning to the inn. She worked herself up to give him the scolding he deserved for frightening her so, but he did not come back to the room. Several hours later, from the taproom below, she recognized his distinctive resonant baritone joining in the chorus of a song. Still, she'd assumed he would return for the night.

Tossing from side to side in the narrow bed, Lucy told herself it felt good to have room to move. How much better she would sleep by herself, as she usually did. She would not be obliged to battle her wayward desires. Having Drake sleep elsewhere was an altogether more satisfactory arrangement, with the exception of one minor detail.

She wanted him more than ever.

The cramped little bed felt cavernous and empty without Drake. Grudgingly, Lucy admitted to herself how much she'd craved one last opportunity to be close to him.

A disturbing question wheedled its way into her thoughts. Where was Drake sleeping tonight, if not with her?

If he was down in the taproom, snoring away in a corner chair, she could accept that. But what if he had found his way into some other woman's bed? He was rich, titled and fiercely attractive in his way. Many women would welcome even a fleeting liaison with such a man.

Perhaps the stylish young widow stranded here on her way to visit friends in Melton Mowbray? Or the innkeeper's buxom daughter? Despite Drake's claim that he cared little for women and his persistent lack of interest in her, Lucy knew men had physical needs they could not long deny. Had their bodily contact over the past two nights stirred a slumbering hunger within him, as it had whetted her desires?

At last she fell into a fitful doze that was not quite sleep. Thoughts and images ran through her mind in a bewildering spiral. Several times she woke from the grip of a tantalizing dream in which Drake had come to bed and begun making love to her.

When she heard unsteady footsteps approaching in the corridor, some rational part of her mind insisted she must be dreaming again, this time more vividly than ever. Only when the door swung open to reveal Drake's rangy figure silhouetted against the feeble light from the corridor, did Lucy believe he was truly there.

He stumbled into the room, emanating fumes of cider that Lucy could smell even from the bed. Fearing he might kick over the brazier with his fumbling, she scrambled out from under the covers.

"Be careful," she scolded in a whisper, pushing the door closed. "What a state you're in!"

"Ah, Lucy." His slurred words were barely intelligible. He leaned upon her so heavily that she almost gave way beneath his weight. "Did you miss me in your bed, little wife?"

Had she heard him right or was she hearing what she wanted to hear in his inebriate ramblings? There could be no mistaking the sensations that engulfed her as she felt his hands through the light cloth of her nightgown. During the past two days and nights, desire had saturated her being like oil soaking into dry tinder. It had left her vulnerable to the slightest spark.

"You need to sleep this off." She strove with all her might to ignore her body's pleadings. Her breath came fast and shallow. Her limbs trembled to contain their wanton inclinations. "Let's get your coat and boots off and untie your stock, so it doesn't strangle you."

Somehow she managed to wrest him out of his coat. When he

staggered, she caught him in her arms, driven to extremity by the delicious prickle of his unshaven whiskers against her brow. She remembered the taste of his kiss on Christmas night.

That was not the kind of kiss she wanted from him now.

Her fingers fumbled with his neck linen as he steadied himself by grasping her hips. Animated by some force that defied logic and propriety, her quivering hand brushed his bare neck. It trailed down to his breastbone.

“Dear God, Lucy, don’t tempt me!” The plea broke from his lips. Or was it a warning?

Suddenly she did not care. She was past mercy and miles beyond caution, caught in the potent undercurrents of forbidden desire. Her hand snaked back up his neck, twining her fingers in his hair. She felt him clutch convulsively at the rounded, sensitive flesh of her backside.

Gripping his hair with savage strength, she thrust his face toward hers, assailing his lips. He fought back, vanquishing her with a deep, probing kiss that tasted of mulled cider—hot, sweet and potent.

“Please,” he moaned even as his lips ravished her face. “Understand... a man has needs... a husband’s rights.”

Though she heard his barely coherent ramblings, Lucy was deaf to everything but the rapid hiss of his breath and the pounding gallop of her own pulse. He might have pulled her down or she might have pushed him. Perhaps they both collapsed under their reckless assault on one another. As Drake fell, he clutched at the throat of her nightgown. The cloth tore from collar to hem with a high, ecstatic screech.

Lucy gasped as the cool air licked her fiery skin. She gasped again when she landed on top of Drake and her bare thigh brushed the straining iron of his arousal. They grappled with one another, rolling sideways until he hovered above her. His chin scratched an incendiary trail over the aching fullness of her breast. His lips parted and his tongue flicked out, swiping thirstily over the responsive peak. In a rush of anguished urgency and wild pleasure, Lucy cried out.

In that instant, she could imagine no greater fulfilment than yielding to his strength. Her body resonating to the sensations unleashed by his ravenous attentions, she thrust herself against him, returning kiss for ravenous kiss.

As though from a great distance, Drake heard Lucy's frantic cry. For a moment it only spurred him on in his urgent quest for release. Then, vaguely, he sensed her desperate struggle beneath him. Even as it inflamed some ancient urge to mastery, a faint voice deep within his heart whispered for restraint. What if he hurt Lucy or the fragile life growing within her? That thought made him recoil from the precipice. Profoundly as he wanted this woman, he could not risk doing harm to her or the child. Summoning his last shred of self-control, he pushed free of her. As he lurched from the room, her terrified sobs dogged his footsteps.

Drake's ears had not deceived him.

As he lumbered away from her, Lucy lay on the bed, exposed and vulnerable, weeping the bitterest tears of her life. In part, they were tears of fear. Fear that she might have harmed her unborn child while in the grip of her feral passion. In part, they were tears of disgust with herself for betraying Jeremy's memory. More than she cared to admit, they were tears of frustration.

She had been racing toward the brink of some unimaginable delight, poised to soar. Now she was empty and alone, thwarted in her desire. Curling herself into a tight, protective ball, she whimpered Drake's name.

Tonight, for the first time, he had succumbed to the demands of manhood enough to admit that she *tempted* him. Was that how he viewed her, as a temptress? One who had enticed his brother into an unwise alliance, then parlayed the result of that liaison into an advantageous match with him.

What a wonder that the rigorously moral viscount should consider besmirching himself to bed such a woman, even if she was his wife.

Yet he had been willing, downright eager in fact. Until she'd betrayed her true colors by responding to his advances with wanton desire. Then he'd pushed her away in revulsion. Now she would never experience the bliss she had dimly glimpsed in his arms.

How in heaven could she ever face him again?



His own shivering jarred Drake to consciousness the next morning. Peering through eyelids he could not open more than a slit, he wondered exactly where he was and how he'd got there. The

pungent aroma of horse muck was his first clue.

Trying to still his chattering teeth, he pulled something tighter around his upper body. Evidently, it had kept him from freezing in the night. Drake recognized the coarse weave of a horse blanket—his second clue. The blanket reeked of stale cider and bile. The smell made his gorge rise ominously. Drake dimly recalled that the bile was probably his.

So he had spent the night on the rough floor of the stable, with only a stinking horse blanket for cover. Where was his coat? How had he come to the stable in the first place? The last he remembered was ordering a cider in the taproom. Drake tried to rise, but the abrupt explosion of pain in his head made him drop to his knees again. Mother of mercy, had he been waylaid and bludgeoned on his way to bed?

Bed.

The thought sent a chill through Drake more intense than any caused by the January frost. It sickened his stomach far worse than his drinking binge. His head alternately whirled and throbbed with memories he would rather have kept at bay. They refused to retreat tamely.

He dimly recalled staggering up the narrow back staircase of the inn, the fire in his loins conquering all reason. The room had been dark and Lucy asleep. She'd wakened, though, and come to him. His next recollections were a chaotic tangle of sound, touch... and taste. As the memory of nuzzling Lucy's bare breast returned to him with provocative clarity, Drake felt himself harden.

For a moment he concentrated on retrieving every sensation from their brief, frenzied tryst. No matter how he tried to savor each sensual detail, there could be no denying the sordid facts. Blind drunk, he'd forced himself on her, torn her nightgown and thrown her across the bed. In spite of her passionate resistance, he had very nearly taken Lucy against her will. Even Jeremy, who'd casually seduced and abandoned her, had not been so gross a cad.

Waves of shame constricted Drake's innards. There, on the stable floor of a third-rate country inn, Viscount Silverthorne retched the last drops of bile from his heaving stomach.

"A waste of good cider, if you don't mind my saying so, milord," boomed a cheerful voice.

"I do mind your saying so." Drake spat, but the acrid taste of guilt clung to his tongue. "I mind anyone saying anything at that volume

and with such vexing good humor. Why do you look none the worse for last night?"

The towering young footman doffed his coat and wrapped it around his shivering master. "Not that I wasn't obliged by your hospitality. The landlord will be able to retire on what he charged you. What yer doin' out here in the cold, sir? Couldn't find a basin to puke in?"

"If it's any of your business, I took a wrong turn on my way to bed. I spent the night out here."

"Shall I go tell her ladyship I've found you?" the boy offered eagerly. "She's bound to be worried that you never made it up to bed."

"Don't trouble yourself." Drake headed out to the courtyard at a cautious pace. No doubt, Lucy's only worry was that he might return in the night to hurl himself on her again like some heat-maddened beast.

"It's time we get out of here. Tell the others we'll be leaving as soon as I can make myself presentable."

The entry hall of *The Black Cygnet* seethed with activity as Drake ventured in. Clearly, the other guests were in no mood to linger when an opportunity of escape had presented itself. Tottering piles of luggage leaned drunkenly against the wainscoting, while their owners barked directions to servants and pestered the innkeeper to prepare their bills.

Spotting the innkeeper's wife waddling down the stairs, Drake advanced to meet her. With every jarring step, his temples throbbed. As much as any of the guests jostling for the landlord's attention, he wanted to be clear of *The Black Cygnet* and its shameful memories. Yet he could not possibly appear at their next stop in his present state.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am." He bowed slightly to the harried-looking woman. "Might I trouble you for the temporary use of a vacant room?"

She swiped a lock of dingy hair from her broad forehead. "Take your pick, milord, I'm sure. At this rate the whole inn will be empty by noon."

With that she descended into the fray in the entry hall.

Drake turned to his footman. "Fetch my brown leather case from the carriage. Then see if you can chase me up some hot water. I need a wash, a shave and fresh clothes before we get back on the

road.”

That was precisely what he needed—soap and scalding hot water to purge the stench of drunken lechery from his body. A lethal-edged razor to shear his face smooth and make him look less like a ravaging black beast. Fresh clothes that did not exude a faint tantalizing whiff of Lucy. Perhaps if he did all that, he could begin to forget what he’d done last night.

Perhaps he could even convince Lucy that he had no memory of his actions. It might be his only hope of holding on to her.

Drake quailed at the thought of facing her again and of the enforced intimacy of their carriage rides in the days to come.

He handed the footman back his coat. “Once you’ve done all that, go tell my wife to prepare for our departure in two hours.”

If he wondered why Viscount Silverthorne did not choose to deliver that message himself, the lad had sense enough to hold his tongue.

Chapter Fifteen

AS THEIR BAROUCHE rolled along the King's highway into London, Lucy felt the lump of apprehension in her throat swell with every mile. She stole a glance at Drake, who leaned back in the seat opposite her with his eyes shut. He was only feigning sleep, she suspected. Possibly for the same reason he'd pretended intense curiosity about the news from *The Spectator*. Both were useful dodges to avoid conversation.

They had scarcely exchanged a dozen words since their abrupt departure from *The Black Cygnet*. On that first day, she had cringed in terror at his every glance. She knew he would soon castigate her for her licentious behavior. Perhaps he would go even further. Might he decide that such a wanton creature had no business raising his heir?

From the moment she realized her condition, Lucy had conjured up a vivid image of her future child. He would be fair, like his father, plump and dimpled with soft golden curls and a gurgling laugh. For a time she'd clung to that vision as the one solace for her aching heart. As the hurt eased, she'd begun to love her dream baby for his own sake.

She pictured herself beaming with pride as she passed him to his grandfather at the baptismal font of Saint Mawe's. Holding his tatalaces as he took his first tottering steps in the Silverthorne nursery. Keeping a slow pace on her horse, as he jogged along beside her on a sturdy pony. His birth was still months away yet already she cared for him with fierce maternal affection.

Lately Drake had begun to figure in her sweet musings about the future, but now he loomed as a possible threat. Her insides constricted as she realized how much power he held over her and her child. Three words returned to haunt Lucy. Words she had scarcely heeded in the grip of passion, intent only on stilling Drake's lips with hers.

A husband's rights.

In the heat of her desire, they might have sounded like a most seductive invitation. In the cold light of day, Lucy recognized them for a dire threat. A husband had rights to a woman's property, to her body, to her children. A wife had none. Even the grievous right

to dissolve a marriage belonged to the husband alone. No matter how he abused, neglected or betrayed her, she was his for as long as he wanted her. If he no longer wanted her, he could divorce her on false charges of adultery.

Sneaking a furtive glance at Drake's closed, dark countenance, Lucy wished she could read his thoughts. Anything, to gain an idea of where she stood with him.

Gradually, the scene outside the carriage window caught her attention. Buildings now clustered more densely along the roadside and the traffic had grown heavier, particularly in the opposite direction. As the winter daylight faded and twilight fell, the market vendors and street hawkers had begun wending their way homeward to small farms on the fringe of the city.

Opening his eyes at last, Drake adjusted his cravat and cleared his throat.

Casting her gaze modestly downward, Lucy tried to swallow the caustic taste of fear in her mouth. Would it come now, the blast of wrath she'd been dreading for the past three days? In the stately houses where they'd stopped, their hosts had carried the conversation with only occasional answers from her and Drake. For fear of rousing any slumbering memories he might have of their last night at *The Black Cygnet*, Lucy had held her tongue. She could only guess what kept Drake silent.

His voice broke the silence with a hoarse rasp. "I trust you have not forgotten your promise?"

Lucy felt herself blanch. Her promise never to love him? She'd given Drake ample reason to suspect she had broken that vow. How could she explain it was not love that had made her fling herself at him that night? It would only confirm his worst opinion of her character and morals.

As she desperately searched for words, their carriage drew to a halt before an elegant town house on Grafton Square.

"Well?" Drake sounded impatient to say the very least. "Are you still willing to help me repay Phyllida for her meddling by playing the lovebirds?"

"Oh, that promise!" A wave of relief broke over Lucy, almost as intense as the previous wave of panic. "Yes, of course."

He held her hand as she climbed down from the barouche box, tucking it securely into the crook of his elbow as they mounted the steps to the entry.

"You will have to bear more than your part in all this," he muttered, sidelong. "I am no hand at love talk and such. No practice."

"It won't be so bad," Lucy found her voice at last. "If you run into trouble, just pretend you're Jeremy and say what you think he would say."

"What will you do when you run into trouble?" Drake asked.

Lucy felt her vital organs tie themselves in knots. Her greatest trouble would be keeping her feelings for this man in the realm of playacting.

Straining to keep her tone casual she replied, "Why I shall pretend you are Jeremy, too."



"Still no sign of the newlyweds?" Neville Strickland surveyed the drawing room of Drake's town house through his monocle, as though he might conjure them by sheer dint of concentration. "You're certain they're on their way?"

He gave Phyllida a faintly suspicious look.

"I have Drake's letter." She clutched the paper like a talisman. "It is dated over a fortnight ago and he wrote that they planned to set out at once."

"You don't suppose any ill has befallen them?" Despite his effort to feign familial concern, Neville could not fully censor a note of gleeful calculation from his voice.

"The way matters stood between them when I left Silverthorne, it would not surprise me if they tore each other to pieces before they ever reached London."

From her simpering smile, Neville got the feeling Phyllida wanted him to pat her on the head for a job well done. He forced a wan grin in reply. His own head still throbbed in retribution for a merry rout at Randall's the night before, aggravated by the worrisome attentions of his creditors. At the reports of his cousin's sudden marriage, most of them made no secret they regarded his expectations as transient, at best. He'd show them.

"I still say it was deucedly irresponsible of you to return to London without them." Though he reminded himself they were allies, Neville could not resist pricking Phyllida's bloated air of self-satisfaction.

She wrinkled her long nose. "That is all very well for you to say. You weren't exiled to that godforsaken wilderness, without a scrap of proper society and the most idle, insolent pack of servants. Poor Reggie was quite fading away from the dreadful food."

Neville rolled his eyes. Could her maternal partiality truly regard that bun-shop-on-legs as the frail, sensitive creature she made him out to be?

"Besides," Phyllida turned to the mantel fussing with several curios, arranging and rearranging them, "by the time I took my leave of Silverthorne, Drake and Lucy could scarcely abide the sight of each other. With him facing a protracted convalescence from his injuries, you can imagine the state of his temper. Like a badger with a sore head."

"Indeed." Neville lapsed into a smile, just picturing the scene. His own headache began to subside. Perhaps all was not lost.

"I have done my part." Abandoning her preoccupation with the objects on the mantle, Phyllida rounded on him. "Now don't you think it high time to tell me about yours? What brilliant plan have you hatched to send our young viscountess bolting for the Continent?"

Could he trust her with such information? Neville wondered as he eyed his cousin's widow dubiously. Her bulging eyes were as bland a blue as ever, but he detected a slight tilt of resolution in her pointy little chin.

"On one condition. Fetch me a spot of brandy. I'm parched."

With a reproachful sigh, Phyllida swept over to a low table by the window and unstopped a decanter. Tipping a parsimonious drop into a glass no bigger than a thimble, she bestowed it upon him like Lady Bountiful dispensing largesse to the poor.

Neville inhaled the brandy's bouquet and made a face. A brew of such indifferent quality scarcely merited his telling her the time of day.

"Oh, very well," he snapped in response to her expectant goggling. "If they are as much at odds as you say, it shouldn't be difficult to part them for good and all. First I will drop a few well-placed hints to make certain her ladyship receives a very chilly reception in London society."

"Is that all?" Phyllida sniffed. "A country parson's daughter snares one of the wealthiest gentlemen of title in England and you think it will take *your* urging to have her shunned?"

Neville bolted his mean little allowance of brandy in a single gulp. "I didn't say it would be difficult, but we must tread carefully. You know how Drake loves to champion the underdog. If he takes a notion that his wife is being persecuted, he will stick by her in spite of the *ton*. No. We must subtly goad her into committing several breaches of etiquette. Perhaps then our dear cousin will see how imprudent it was for him to rush into a match with such disparity of birth and fortune."

"Can we make life unpleasant enough for Lucy that she will abandon the security of a wealthy marriage?" Phyllida sound doubtful.

"That is where the second phase of my plan comes in. Having rendered life with Drake quite intolerable, we must present her with a superior alternative."

"What sort of alternative?"

"A young, handsome, charming alternative, of course. While everyone else is treating her with icy contempt, we shall find a gallant blade to give Lucy a very warm reception indeed."

For a moment Phyllida looked blank, as though his words were having difficulty penetrating her torpid mind. Then a look of transparent admiration came over her. "Oh, you are clever! Have you anyone in mind?"

Neville could not resist preening a little. Admiration, even from the likes of Phyllida Strickland, was heady stuff. Drake's young bride would soon find that out, to her detriment.

Puffing up his cravat he replied, "As a matter of fact, I..."

The sound of voices and footsteps in the entryway arrested his words. After a hasty knock, the butler appeared to announce the arrival of Viscount and Lady Silverthorne.

"Take their wraps and show them in, Moss. Then let Cook know we'll have company for supper." Phyllida glanced at Neville. One pale thin brow raised and a gloating smile tugged at the corner of her bloodless lips. "Will you join us?"

"To welcome our dear cousins to London?" Though his stomach rebelled at the mere notion of food, Neville could not resist. "I would not miss the opportunity on any account. I believe this calls for a celebration. Moss, why don't you scour the cellar for a decent bottle of claret?"

When the butler looked to Lady Phyllida she nodded, though not before treating Neville to a petulant frown. "Pray, show the

viscount and his wife in, Moss, *before* you go poking about in the wine cellar.”

“Very good, madam.”

The travelers soon entered looking none the worse for their long journey, so far as Neville could see. He and Drake exchanged a manly handshake, while the ladies gingerly touched cheeks.

“What a time you have taken getting here,” Phyllida fussed at Drake. “We were beginning to worry.”

For a man reported to be at odds with his wife, Drake hovered around her a good deal more closely than Neville would have liked. “I must apologize, Cousin Phyllida. Did my letter create the impression we would be pressing straight through? We broke our journey with relatives along the way.”

He laid a hand on Lucy’s shoulder. “Made a delayed honeymoon of it.”

“Oh,” said Phyllida.

When Drake started to withdraw his hand from her shoulder, his wife reached up and caught it in hers. “A snowstorm stranded us in the Midlands for a few days, but no harm befell us.”

She glanced back at her husband, and the pair exchanged a look that Neville could not read. He did mark the blush that rose in Lucy’s cheeks, however. He marked something else as well. Drake’s bride was a deucedly fine-looking filly. He had not thought so at the time of their wedding. She’d been too scrawny and pallid then. Though she still fell short of his plump, saucy ideal, she had acquired an indefinable luster—the kind that might melt even as implacable a pillar of granite as Viscount Silverthorne.

A surge of panic rose in Neville’s gorge.

“Is there time for us to wash and change before we dine?” Drake asked.

“What?” The question roused Phyllida from her stupor. “Oh, of course.” A lifetime of toad-eating asserted itself. “You are our honored guests. We dine at your pleasure.”

“You forget yourself, my dear,” snapped Neville. All his banked irritation with Phyllida burst into open flame. “Drake is the master of this house. It is you and Reggie who live here by his sufferance.”

She shot him a poisonous look, her thin lips drawn into so tight a line as to be almost invisible. “Do you never forget *your* reliance on Drake’s charity, Neville?”

“Come now, Cousins.” Drake chuckled with a warm note of

genuine amusement, the likes of which Neville had never heard from him before. "I may hold the deed to this place. However, since I scarcely darken the doorstep once a year, even I think of it as Phyllida's home. For the duration of our stay, she is our hostess and we are her guests."

"Her honored guests." Lucy's eyes twinkled with a kind of merriment Neville neither liked nor understood. It was as though the pair of them were privy to some jest, which no one else shared.

"If you wish to change for supper, your rooms are ready, as they have been for almost a fortnight." Clearly, Phyllida could not resist needling them further on that score. "I have repapered your room since you were here last, Drake. Lucy, I have put you in the west corner bedchamber. It has a fine view of the square."

"I suppose separate quarters are a good idea." Drake sounded disappointed. "Lucy complains so of my taking the lion's share of the bedclothes."

"Drake Strickland!" His wife slapped his arm in playful horror. "Such an indelicate thing to say in company!"

Seizing her from behind, Drake wrapped his arms around Lucy resting his chin on the crown of her head. "Neville and Phyllida are family, my sweet. Besides, everyone excuses newlyweds for their foolish fondness."

Neville could scarcely believe his eyes. He knew superstitious country folk talked of the fairies stealing infants and leaving changelings behind. He wondered what horde of elvenkind it had taken to abduct his cousin. The man in this room must be an imposter. No other explanation could account for his present behavior.

Nuzzling Lucy's ear, Drake murmured just loud enough for Neville to catch, "Never fear, my angel. I am not so unfamiliar with this house that I cannot find my way around in the dark."

Pressing her fingers to his lips, Lucy protested, "I must get you out of here, before you embarrass me beyond recovery. The west room sounds fine, Cousin Phyllida. Thank you for coming ahead to London and preparing such a warm welcome for us."

The pair of them ambled off arm in arm, gazing deep into one another's eyes. Whispering and laughing together.

When he judged they were out of earshot, Neville turned on Phyllida. "I wonder they didn't tear each other to pieces on the journey from Nicholthwait, in a fit of passion! If that is your idea of

a couple at odds, I'd hate to see a devoted pair."

Phyllida wilted onto the settee, fanning her face with her hand. "They were nothing like this when I left, of that I can assure you. They were scarcely speaking. I can't think what has come over them. I have never seen Drake..."

"Smile?" hissed Neville. "Jest? Behave like a love-struck schoolboy? Perhaps the blow on the head he took at that mine has addled his wits."

"Whatever shall we do now?" Phyllida wailed into her handkerchief. "All is lost!"

"I'll be damned if it is." Neville paced the Persian hearth rug furiously.

"Be sensible." Phyllida wiped her ruddy nose. She was a revolting sight with those pale eyes swollen and her sallow complexion all blotchy. "We've lost, if we ever had a chance of winning in the first place. We are back where we started before Jeremy died."

"Not quite. Until that filly foals, I am still my cousin's heir. This is no time to lose our nerve. We must redouble our efforts, hold fast to our plan and see it through."

"Plan?" The word burst from Phyllida like a hiccough. "Get the *ton* to snub her and set some rogue to woo her?"

"Not just any rogue." Neville toyed with his quizzing glass turning it over and over with his fingers as he rummaged his memory for faces and names. "We need the very prince of rogues. He won't come cheap, though, if he's to be had at all. Can you lay hands on some money?"

"You're daft, Neville, if you think I'll sink a ha'penny into this ridiculous plot of yours." Phyllida blew her nose quite forcefully as if to signal the end of their discussion.

Neville sank onto the settee beside her.

"You'll find the money," he predicted in a smooth mocking tone, "because you cannot abide the thought of Reggie bowing and scraping to that woman's children and living on their charity."

Her bland features hardened. The flesh of her face drew taut. Squeezing her innocent handkerchief in a death grip, she kept her eyes averted from Neville, staring straight ahead. She sat silent for some little time, while he waited patiently for the answer he knew would come.

"How much will you need?"



Drake and Lucy were barely halfway up the stairs when she put a hand to her lips in a vain effort to stifle an ungovernable burst of laughter.

"Ssh!" Drake nodded at the stiff back of the housemaid striding several brisk steps ahead of them.

"I can't help it," whispered Lucy. "Did you see their faces? I feared your Cousin Neville was going to take a fit of apoplexy."

Suddenly, Drake found it difficult to restrain his own laughter. His heart lightened for the first time in weeks. It felt good.

"Phyllida's eyes—did you ever see a toad trodden on?"

Lucy almost bent double with silent mirth, perhaps unaware that he still held her hand. For a fleeting moment the ever present fear had left her eyes. Drake felt as if his heart had escaped from somewhere dark and suffocating. He almost warmed to Phyllida and Neville for making this ruse necessary.

"You put on a most convincing performance." As he bent to whisper the compliment, a stray tendril of Lucy's hair brushed against his cheek. Drake had never been struck by lightning, but just then he could imagine how it might feel.

She turned her gaze full upon him, her eyes twinkling with mischievous merriment and a hint of warmth that pierced him to the core. "You, on the other hand, laid it on far too thick. I may blush all over again remembering it—stealing the bedclothes!"

"I seem to recall you grumbling something to that effect after our first night at *The Black Cygnet*." The instant the words left his mouth, Drake longed to recall them.

Lucy stiffened and averted her eyes.

Fortunately, at that moment they reached her bedchamber. After a brief flirtatious exchange staged for the benefit of Phyllida's housemaid, they took leave of each other to dress for dinner.

As Drake washed and changed clothes, his pulse quickening in anticipation of the meal. Lucy might be prepared to ignore or excuse his outrageous conduct at *The Black Cygnet*, but she had clearly not forgotten. In the coming weeks, he must do everything within his power to persuade her he posed no threat.

He ran a finger along his cheek, where the merest brush of her hair had seared him. Was he equal to the challenge?

Chapter Sixteen

FROM HER CORNER seat in a quiet receiving room at Almack's, Lucy raised her fan and gave it a dispirited flutter.

The purpose of her action was twofold. First, to cool a bright flush that blazed in her cheeks. Second, to make her as inconspicuous as possible. This evening was their first true *night out* since arriving in London. If it was a sample of what she could expect for the duration of their stay, this would be a very long winter indeed.

Drake had put on his attentive show beforehand for Phyllida's benefit. Upon their arrival he had dutifully made her introduction to the Lady Patronesses who welcomed her with gushing cordiality that scarcely masked their predatory eyes. After a single stiff dance, he had wandered off to speak with some political acquaintance, abandoning her to Lady Phyllida's chaperonage.

In the hour that followed, Lucy had discovered the penalty for daring to interlope in a class to which she'd not been born. Everyone had been unfailingly courteous. Yet behind their mannerly façade, they'd made her run a gauntlet of innocent-sounding questions calculated to trip her up and jests that she did not comprehend. All the while they'd watched and judged, declaring their opinion of her subtly with a raised eyebrow or the flare of an aristocratic nostril.

More than anything, she longed to flee their civilized baiting and never venture out into London society again. All that held her back was the thought of her child... and her husband. These people represented her child's future and she meant to win them over. Tonight was not the time to start. Let them have their fill of staring, laughing and gossiping behind her back. If she deported herself modestly, some of them might relent later.

"My dear Lady Gaveston, good evening." A smooth, masculine voice hailed the ancient relation of Drake's to whom Lucy had attached herself. "What a pleasant surprise to discover you in town! I trust Godfrey and Horace are well."

"Eh? What do you say?" Her ladyship inclined a less-than-sound ear to the gentleman who had taken a seat beside her.

"Your nephews." He pronounced the words slowly and at great

volume. "Godfrey and Horace, they are well I trust?"

Fixing the questioner with a rheumy glare Lady Gaveston snapped, "Flourishing, like all scoundrels."

He greeted her testy remark with a gust of free, amiable laughter. "Dear madam, as bracing a wit as ever!"

Lowering her fan by a degree or two, Lucy scrutinized the gentleman who had so agreeably engaged a neglected old lady. First she spied a well-groomed head of ash blond hair and expressive eyebrows in a darker shade. Then, an appealing pair of clear, candid blue eyes.

As Lucy watched he glanced her way, transfixing her with a gaze of obvious admiration.

Blushing, she abruptly raised the fan and ducked her head.

"I vow, Lady Gaveston, the unexpected pleasure of our meeting has quite driven off my manners. I fear I have escaped the happiness of an introduction to your fair companion."

"Oh, this chit. She's Silverthorne's bride."

He replied so quietly, Lucy knew he did not intend the words for Lady Gaveston. "Has the new viscountess a name of her own?"

Letting her fan fall again, she marked his straight slender nose and wide, frank smile.

"Lucy," she murmured.

"Lucy," he repeated, lingering over her name as if savoring its taste on his tongue. "*Gayer than the blush on roses are the glories on her face.* I consider it a grave misfortune for the company that our most beautiful adornment should conceal herself in a dim, quiet corner. Would you do me the honor of a dance? I feel it my duty to put your charms on greater display."

Lucy hesitated. "I am a married woman, sir. Should you not be dancing with the debutantes?"

"On the contrary, dear lady." A shadow of wistful sorrow darkened his clear blue eyes. "You see, I have recently suffered a grave disappointment in love."

Her heart warmed in sympathy at the regretful catch in his voice.

"This is my first social engagement since it happened," he continued. "I could not bear to risk my vulnerable affections so soon again."

He smiled bravely. "I do enjoy a dance, though. A married lady like you would make the ideal partner."

"I suppose..." Lucy glanced at Lady Gaveston, ready to ask if she

would object to their deserting her.

She discovered that her companion had lapsed into a peaceful doze. Common sense suggested that it would be the better part of valor not to disturb her ladyship.

"I earnestly entreat you, dear lady. Take pity on a heartbroken man. Do him the favor of providing a few moments' precious distraction from his sorrow."

Extending her hand, Lucy smiled. "I count your invitation as great a favor as you deem my acceptance, sir."

"Then you are gracious as well as beautiful, Lady Silverthorne. Your husband is a fortunate man indeed."

Lucy bit her lip. "You may be the only person present who holds that opinion, sir."

Marking the censorious stares that followed their progress to the dance floor, she explained, "Perhaps you have not heard of my origins. My father is a simple country vicar in the Lake District. I am quite devoid of fortune or aristocratic connections. I have nothing to recommend me as a wife to His Lordship."

They paused a moment before joining the other dancers marshaling for a set of Sir Roger de Coverley.

"Nonsense! I recognize no fortune but abundant wit and no peerage but that of superior understanding."

Buttressed by her partner's charming reassurances, Lucy took the floor on his arm with her head held high. The new lightness in her heart soon communicated itself to her feet. Almost before she realized it, she had executed three separate dances with ever increasing confidence and gaiety. As the music concluded for the third, she protested a need to stand out and take some refreshment before continuing.

"How thoughtless of me, dear Lady Silverthorne! Pray let me fetch you a cup of punch. I cannot think when I last committed such a lapse in manners. I can only plead my enjoyment of your company and my pride in squiring you this little while."

Lucy hastened to assure him that she had also enjoyed their dances. She did not take the least notice of Lady Phyllida until Drake's cousin suddenly appeared directly in front of her.

"Enjoying your first evening in society I see. To think how you resisted coming to London. I had no notion you were such an accomplished dancer."

"There are assembly rooms even in the wilds of Westmorland,

Cousin Phyllida," Lucy answered in a bantering tone born of her newfound assurance.

"Of a kind I suppose, but do you find many partners as agreeable as your present one? I don't believe we have met. Will you do me the kindness of an introduction?"

"Of course. Lady Phyllida Strickland, may I introduce..." Plundering her memory for a name, Lucy realized with horror that she had not the slightest clue of her partner's identity. "I... that is..."

That instant of mortification stretched on interminably. How could she have committed such folly? To dance, not once but thrice, with a man to whom she had not received a proper introduction?

As Lucy stammered and reddened, trying desperately to fight back a burst of tears that would complete her humiliation, her partner spoke. His words were the sweetest she'd heard in a very long time.

"I fear the excitement of the evening has affected Lady Silverthorne's memory. I am of far less consequence than most of the persons she has met tonight. My old friend, Lady Gaveston was good enough to introduce us. I am Eugene Dalrymple. Perhaps you have heard of my aunt, the Duchess of Swansea."

The gentleman glanced up at Lucy as he bowed over Phyllida's hand. Merriment twinkled in his blue eyes. A look passed between them of such intimacy that Lucy dared not sustain it.

"Mr. Dalrymple, of course," Phyllida gushed. "Who has not heard of your aunt? She is abroad, I believe?"

"Indeed, Lady Phyllida. How kind of you to inquire. She has taken up residence in Naples where the climate is better suited to her delicate health. I am in London temporarily to oversee her affairs but I expect to rejoin her soon."

"The Duchess is fortunate to have such a devoted nephew."

Mr. Dalrymple nodded toward Lucy. "Your family is fortunate to have gained such a delightful addition."

Lady Phyllida gave a fleeting and insincere smile even by her usual standards. "Where has Drake got off to, Lucy? He has been lax in his duties as an attentive bridegroom."

Again the gallant Mr. Dalrymple rode to Lucy's rescue. "Viscount Silverthorne? Why, I saw him a little while ago, deep in talk with Lord Lonsdale. Urgent Parliamentary business by the sounds of it. His Lordship asked me to deputize for him on the dance floor, until

he could extricate himself from the conversation.”

Lucy felt certain that Drake had done nothing of the sort. However, the explanation appeared to pacify Phyllida as well as several blatant eavesdroppers nearby. As she sipped her punch and chuckled appreciatively at Mr. Dalrymple’s amusing stories, she was struck by his similarity to Jeremy in looks and manner. Why was it then that her heart picked up tempo only when Drake appeared behind the younger man, looking like a raven looming over a goldfinch?

“It is time we left,” he announced. For Lucy’s ears alone, he muttered, “You have made yourself enough of a spectacle for one evening.”

Ignoring the arm he held out stiffly toward her, Lucy turned to Eugene Dalrymple. “Thank you for taking such pains to make me feel welcome, sir. I hope we may meet again while we are both in London.”

He held her hand to his lips for a heartbeat longer than decorum dictated. “I look forward to it with the greatest pleasure, dear lady.”

As Lucy and Drake settled into the carriage for their return trip to Grafton Square, a contentious silence fell between them.

Then Drake spoke. “You will have nothing more to do with that man.”

“I beg your pardon? Even you could not be so unfeeling as to warn me away from the one person in London who has extended me a sincere welcome.”

“Sincere?” Drake exhaled a derisive breath. “I wouldn’t trust him to spell the word.”

“What a cynic you are!” Lucy bristled. “If you must know, I danced with Mr. Dalrymple out of pity. The poor man has recently suffered a romantic disappointment and he could not bear to dance with any of the eligible ladies so soon.”

“Poppycock!” Drake glared pointedly at Lucy’s abdomen. Its gentle swelling was more noticeable when she sat. “You would do well in future not to swallow every story some suave beau slips you.”

His malicious dig ignited weeks of seething, combustible emotions within her. “You would do well not to act like a jealous husband. The pose does not become you.”

“Jealous?” Drake flared. “Of all the absurdities!”

“Precisely.” Lucy fought to douse a flicker of disappointment that

he had denied her charge so forcefully. “We made a vow if you will recall, a prior contract never to mar our association with common jealousy. Under those terms I believe I am within my rights to enjoy an innocent dance with such an agreeable gentleman whenever our paths cross. It is not as though I am bestowing any favors you crave from me.”

Whatever Drake meant to reply, he did not get the opportunity. At that moment their carriage halted before Number 17 Grafton Square. For the benefit of any servants who might be watching, Lucy took his arm as they alighted.

When at last they reached the door of her bedchamber, Lucy hesitated. “Will you...? Do you...?”

Since their arrival in London, it had been Drake’s custom to visit awhile with her before retiring to his own bed. The look on Phyllida’s face was worth any price in lost sleep, he’d declared. In spite of the persistent temptation to throw herself at him, Lucy had come to enjoy these quiet talks in the darkened room. This might be the perfect opportunity to resolve their silly dispute over Mr. Dalrymple.

His dark features an impenetrable mask, Drake shook his head decisively. “I have had enough playacting to last me the rest of my life.”

With that, he turned on his heel and strode away.



Drake scarcely gained the sanctuary of his bedchamber when his limbs gave way to violent trembling. It was so bad he could neither untie his stock nor pry off his boots. Incapable of undressing, he paced the floor. He recalled vividly how Lucy had slapped his face on their wedding night. That momentary sting was nothing to the blow she had just dealt him.

“It is not as though I am bestowing any favors you crave from me.” Her words gouged his heart like the knotted tips of a lash.

Did she have no idea what he craved after their tumultuous night at *The Black Cygnet*? He craved *her*, body, heart and soul. As a starveling craved bread or a drowning man his next breath of air. That craving gnawed at him more fiercely with each passing day... and night. Tonight, watching that smooth dandy Dalrymple feast at a table from which he’d scarcely sampled a crumb, Drake feared it

would devour him.



Lucy peered out from the alcove of the sitting room, squinting at the mantel clock. It would soon be time to dress for the theater party this evening. A fine kettle of fish she'd got herself into, as Mrs. Maberley would say.

Occupied with penning a letter to her father, she'd scarcely heard Phyllida and her friends enter the main part of the room. Fearing they might invite her to join them if she showed herself, Lucy kept on with her writing. Precious little worry the soft scratch of her pen would be heard above their shrill chatter.

However, as the afternoon waned, more guests had arrived. Long since finished her letter, Lucy was now too embarrassed to come out and admit she'd been there all the time, eavesdropping on some rather scandalous gossip. By and by Phyllida had called for a claret cup to be served. The level of conversation sank lower still.

"I hear Lady Hargreaves is with child at last," said one of the women. "At White's they are laying five to one odds the offspring is not his lordship's."

"I shall soon have to retire from society... again," sighed another member of the party.

Her comment met with some laughter and much sympathetic clucking.

"Does Spenser give you no peace?" someone asked, her words slurring audibly. "You simply must find him a mistress."

"Pooh, they are such a bother!"

More laughter.

"Wait until this one is born, at least. If you're like me, you might enjoy his attentions more."

There were one or two gasps of mock horror at the indelicacy of the comment. One Lucy was certain came from Phyllida.

"I should say," chuckled the expectant mother. "I am quite shameless. If my husband is absent more than a day or two, I start casting covetous glances at the footmen!"

It was not long before they all began telling tales of the wantonness brought on by their pregnancies. Even Phyllida, much to Lucy's amazement. They were still airing the topic when the clock in a nearby church steeple chimed the hour.

"Oh, hear that?" Phyllida squealed. "Six already and we are for Covent Garden this evening."

The other ladies also exclaimed about the lateness of the hour. One belched noisily.

Before Lucy knew it, she was alone in the sitting room again. After waiting a moment to be sure no one would return, she hurried off to her bedchamber where she began to dress for the theatre.

Removing her day gown, she let her hand rest a moment against the gentle rounding of her belly. A sly smile rippled across her lips.

In a whisper, she addressed her unborn child. "So you are responsible for the naughty feelings I've developed toward your Papa."

She caught herself. Drake was not the father of her child. What a foolish thing to say! This baby was all she had left of Jeremy. He would live on in his son. How could she deny him in the secrecy of her most private thoughts, the one place she was at liberty to acknowledge her baby's true paternity?

Still, it was a relief to understand at last the source of her dangerous preoccupation with Drake. If what she'd overheard was true, her wanton longings were simply another troublesome symptom of her pregnancy. Like the biliousness of those first months or the cravings for strange foods that still plagued her by times. Hurriedly slipping into a new gown, she laughed at her own foolishness. How could she have imagined it was anything more serious than that?

She almost laughed again when she found Drake in the entryway, impatiently awaiting her.

"I arrived home not twenty minutes ago from Westminster," he bristled, drumming his fingers on the balustrade. "Yet I have managed to wash, shave and change into evening clothes. Meanwhile you ladies, who have had all day to don your frippery, are in danger of leaving us late."

Not a single word about her new gown or how the yellow hair ribbons brought out the color of her eyes. Lucy stifled a grin as Drake stiffly held her wrap. How could she have imagined herself harboring tender feelings for this brusque, taciturn man? Yet, when the back of his hand brushed the sensitive flesh of her upper arm, strange white-hot energy surged between them.

Much to Lucy's dismay, she could scarcely keep her eyes upon the Covent Garden stage that evening for a lively production of *A*

School for Scandal. Again and again she found her gaze straying sidelong to Drake's crisp profile or lingering on his strong, shapely hands. Safe in the knowledge that her interest held no deeper significance, she seized this rare opportunity to indulge it fully.

She remembered the sensuous contrast of Drake's unshaven chin scraping across the responsive flesh of her breast, followed by the intoxicating tickle of his side-whiskers. Her errant thoughts dwelt on the first moment she'd felt herself lifted in Drake's arms. Though she scarcely noticed it at the time, Lucy now recalled she'd never felt so completely vulnerable, yet so perfectly safe.

When the audience broke into applause at the end of Act Three, Lucy came to herself with a start. Busily, she plied her fan to cool the wanton flush that smarted in her cheeks. She did not notice the usher entering their box until he held a folded note card before her.

Before she could touch the paper, Drake snapped it away. After a mere glance, he tossed it onto her lap without a word or a look.

"It's from the gentleman across the way with his compliments." The usher nodded toward a box on the opposite side of the stage.

Looking up, Lucy saw Mr. Dalrymple eagerly trying to catch her eye. When he realized he had succeeded, he smiled broadly and bowed. She nodded briefly in response then glanced down at his note.

Your vibrant beauty eclipses even the best Covent Garden has to offer, it declared in a copperplate script.

Somehow, Lucy could not summon the thrill such a gallant compliment should have evoked. In truth, she had become a trifle impatient with Mr. Dalrymple's constant attentions. She was a married woman after all with a reputation to consider. Not that he had overstepped the bounds of propriety... yet. This note came perilously close.

If only Drake hadn't played the tyrant and warned her away from the gentleman, she would never have encouraged him in the first place. Lucy stifled an exasperated sigh. As far as she could tell, Drake no longer cared with whom she consorted. Gone all day on business or to the House of Lords, he had dropped all pretense of affection, even for the fun of goading Phyllida.

During their evenings at the various routs and balls that presaged The Season, he left her to her own devices. If Eugene Dalrymple had not come to her rescue so continually, she would have suffered a very dismal time indeed. Lucy chided herself for failing to

appreciate his friendliness. Looking over at the young man again, she flashed him her warmest smile.

As the play recommenced, she noticed that Drake's gaze never veered from the stage. Gradually, she noticed something else. One actress kept looking up at their box.

"Cousin Phyllida," Lucy whispered. "Who is playing the part of Lady Teazle?"

"Goodness, do you know nothing? That is Mrs. Beaumont. She is the most celebrated actress in the country next to Mrs. Siddons."

"She is very beautiful."

"My, yes. They say she has her pick of gentlemen. They swarm around her like moths to a candle."

Again, Lucy caught the actress glancing up at them... at Drake. She forced herself to smile and flutter her fan. Really it was too ridiculous a notion even to entertain. Even so, a chill of apprehension lodged in her heart.

Chapter Seventeen

A WEEK AFTER the theater party, Drake hesitated on the threshold of his grandmother's bedchamber, letting his eyes become accustomed to the gloom.

"Are you awake, Grandmother? You can dispense with your pose of illness. I am alone today."

He drew several quick breaths of the close, stale air faintly perfumed with the scent of desiccated rose petals. Having received no reply to his whispered question, he backed toward the door.

"Francis?" The deeper shadows at the head of the bed stirred slightly. "Is that you my dear?"

Perhaps she hadn't been putting on a performance after all, Drake reflected. Never had he heard his grandmother's voice so soft, so affectionate. And in all his life, no one had dared to call him by his given name.

With reluctant steps, he propelled himself deeper into the room. He would have given half his fortune for the liberty to throw open the draperies and raise the window sash. "Yes, Grandmother. It's Drake. I have come to visit with you. Alone."

Since their arrival in London, he and Lucy had been coming to call at least once a week, often with Phyllida or Neville in tow. Drake realized from the start that the marchioness was not ill in the least. That's why he had come alone today, resolved to discover what was behind her charade.

"Drake? You sounded so like your grandfather. For just a moment..." Her words trailed off wistfully but she soon rallied. "Well, I am glad to have you to myself at last. We need to talk, you and I."

This sounded more like the woman he knew. Pulling a chair closer to the bed, Drake took a seat.

Before he was able to pose any of the questions he'd come to ask, his grandmother confounded him with one of her own. "How are you finding this honest business arrangement you call a marriage?"

Her words hit Drake like a solid blow to the stomach. During their previous visits, his grandmother had maintained a cool but painfully correct facade. Though she scarcely acknowledged Lucy's presence, at least she'd refrained from overt hostility. He should

have known it couldn't last.

"It is not what I'd expected." No lie, that. Why then, did he find it so hard to meet his grandmother's discerning gaze?

"But not unpleasant," he hastened to add.

"Not unpleasant." The marchioness chuckled, a dry rustling sound like an autumn breeze stirring the fallen leaves. "You are like your grandfather and growing more so every day. I never found another like him though not for lack of trying. She is very beautiful, this wife of yours."

It was not a question, but Drake felt compelled to reply all the same. "That is an understatement."

"Is it? How would you describe her then?"

"You are asking the wrong brother," Drake replied with a rueful sigh. "Jeremy could have found the right words to do her justice. I have not that happy facility."

The marchioness reached out one tiny, indomitable hand and brought it to rest on Drake's. "No you do not, my boy. And no bad thing, either. The world is full of wags and poets these days when it needs more men of heart and deeds."

This truly left Drake bereft of words. Never had his grandmother spoken to him with such approval, almost fondness. He savored the unaccustomed softness of her touch.

"So, my wishful old eyes have not deceived me. You've come to love this girl. That is what you didn't expect from marriage."

All Drake's defenses bristled. He sprang from his seat and began to pace the room.

"Why do you care?" The atmosphere stifled him worse with each breath he drew. "After the way you set your face against my marriage, the last thing I expected from you was a full interrogation on the subject. Why did you feign this illness to lure us to London?"

"Sit down and behave yourself, Francis Drake Strickland! Of course I disapproved of you rushing off from the supper table and appearing at breakfast betrothed. What was I to think, but that you'd fallen prey to a fortune huntress? When I came to hear of your bride's character, naturally I wanted to see the truth for myself, and to heal the breach between us. You may not believe this, dear boy, but I did want to see you make a love match."

"I am sorry to disappoint you on that score, Grandmother." Drake strode for the door.

He had been a disappointment to everyone in his life from the

moment he'd been born. A disappointment to his father who'd wanted a live wife and a healthy heir. A disappointment to Jeremy who'd chafed under his stiff paternalism. A disappointment to Lucy who wanted a handsome charmer for a husband.

"You have had too little love in your life." The words stopped Drake in his tracks. "For which I take my share of the blame. You do not disappoint me, though I think from your tone that you disappoint yourself. I sensed there was something not right between you and your bride, for all the show you put on to vex Phyllida. Come tell me all about it."

Reluctantly, Drake turned back.

Any other woman so slight and small might have looked lost in that cavernous bed. Yet his grandmother in her wrap and nightcap looked as self-possessed as any empress on her throne.

She held out her hand to him. "Are you certain she cannot love you? If that is so, then she's a little fool. Would you even recognize love if she offered it?"

Something in that frank question pierced Drake's armor, lodging in his heart as surely as Cupid's arrow.

"Perhaps I wouldn't, grandmother." He took his seat again and reclaimed her hand. "You have had plenty of experience with marriage, though. I shall tell you about Lucy and me, and see what you think."

A grudging ghost of a smile fluttered on his grandmother's resolute lips. "Now you are talking sense."

"And when I'm finished," Drake's voice warmed, "I shall tell you a piece of news that should make you very happy."



"You're home at last," Lucy said to Drake, as the butler took his hat and gloves. "Had you forgotten that Cousin Neville is taking tea with us today?"

Turning on her with eyes that seemed truly to see her for the first time in weeks, Drake took her arm. "I must admit, it had slipped my mind. But I *am* home, at last. I doubt Neville will be much offended if I don't change clothes. We have an engagement this evening besides, do we not?"

Something about his casual, relaxed tone disturbed Lucy even as it warmed her. Was it her imagination or did his coat smell vaguely

of a woman's scent—dried roses?

"Engagement? Why, yes. Don't say you've forgotten that as well? We are invited to a ball at Henley House."

"A coveted invitation from Lady Henley, how could I forget such a social coup?" Drake ushered her through the door to the sitting room where Phyllida was already pouring tea. "To what do we owe the honor, do you suppose?"

Lucy could not help smiling, despite the ridiculous suspicions that buzzed insistently in her thoughts. This sardonic good humor sounded so like the old Drake of Silverthorne days. Would they ever return to her beloved Lake Country?

"I cannot imagine why Lord and Lady Henley have invited us." Settling onto the sofa, she took the cup and saucer Phyllida held out to her. "We are hardly the toast of the *ton*... at least I am not."

"Perhaps that is our *entrée*." Drake plucked up a dainty square of bread thickly spread with butter and ate it in two quick bites. "As I recall, Lady Henley was something of an outcast herself when she and his lordship returned from Florence as newlyweds. In the past fifteen years most people have conveniently forgotten she was a *divorcée*."

Neville's monocle fell from his staring eye. "Surely, you don't count your charming bride on the social level of a *divorcée*, Drake? Cousin Lucy has won any number of admirers, that young nephew of the Duchess of Swansea, for instance."

Phyllida nodded. "If dear Lucy were not a married woman, I should say Mr. Dalrymple was smitten with her."

Seeing a darkness shadow her husband's expression, Lucy blurted the first remark that entered her head. "How was your day, Drake? A lively debate in the Lords?"

Before her husband could reply, Neville spoke. "I was down to Westminster this afternoon, Cousin. Didn't see any sign of you. Not playing truant, I hope?"

Nibbling on a bit of cake, Lucy listened intently for Drake's answer. If not at the House of Lords, where *had* he been until such a late hour?

"I gave my speech before noon and left them to chew on it," said Drake. "The Lords will find it a bitter mouthful, no doubt. I demanded the immediate suspension of this cursed American blockade before it cripples British industry and makes paupers of half the country."

He shot his cousin a suspicious look. "What on earth were you doing there, Neville? Taken a sudden interest in politics?"

"Dear me, no!" Neville flicked his wrist dismissively. "A few of the fellows do like to take over the gallery now and then to heckle the Prime Minister. Perceval is such a sober pedant, he makes fine sport!"

"I've done with them all, frankly," said Drake. "I have tried my best and I believe I've managed to win a measure of support over the past few weeks. It is going to take more than reason for this government to shift from its blinkered course. A hungry mob storming Westminster like the Parisians stormed the Bastille, perhaps. I would prefer to be as far from London as possible when the storm breaks. All I can do now is return to Silverthorne and tend to my own enterprises."

"Return to Silverthorne?" Phyllida wailed. "But the Season has scarcely begun! There will be ever so many more amusing things to do now that spring is here."

"Think of the roads," chimed in Neville. "You'll be up to your axles in mud all the way to Nicholthwait."

Whatever had Drake's cousins so flustered Lucy could only sip her tea demurely and make every effort to suppress her amusement. Her heart swelled with pleasure at the thought of an early return to her dear home and gratitude to Drake for making it possible.

"If we wait a week, I fear you might be correct, Neville." Drake popped a morsel of gooseberry tart into his mouth and bolted the last of his tea. "The cold weather has lingered far past its usual limit and I mean to take advantage of it. We will be on our way tomorrow."

"Why so soon?" Phyllida's chin began to quiver. "You have been here such a short time. Can you at least stay long enough for me to arrange a proper send-off?"

Drake shrugged. "This do at Henley House will have to serve as our farewell. It could be dangerous for us to tarry."

"Dangerous?" Neville and Phyllida spoke together, looking from Drake to each other.

Lucy wondered what he meant as well. She was as astonished as the cousins when he reached over and caught her hand.

"If we wait for the roads to thaw and the spring mud to dry, I fear my dear wife will be too close to her time for making such a long, jarring journey."

“Her time?” Neville croaked.

Phyllida dug him soundly in the ribs with a sharp elbow. “Cousin Drake means that Lucy is expecting a baby. What... exciting news. Con... congratulations to both of you.”

Lucy sat mute while Drake beamed as proudly as any new father-to-be and his cousins stammered their unenthusiastic good wishes. She’d known they would have to announce the news eventually, before her swelling belly outstripped even the concealing fashions of the day. If only Drake had given her a little warning.

“So.” Phyllida turned to her. “How long have you known?”

“A... while. “ Now it was Lucy’s turn to stammer. “I should have guessed much earlier... but having no experience of such matters...”

“This calls for a toast,” declared Neville, with forced heartiness. “Got anything potable left in your wine cellar, Drake? This promises to be a night of celebration indeed.”

During the weeks that followed, Lucy was to recall those words again and again with great clarity.



In the entry hall of the London house where he’d never felt master, Drake waited for Lucy and Phyllida to join him. Three times he retied his stock. Twice he brushed invisible specks of dust from his grey trousers. A few weeks earlier, at Phyllida’s insistence, he’d visited a fashionable Bond Street tailor for a whole new wardrobe. His familiar old clothes were threadbare and ten years out of style; she’d fussed until he agreed to go. Despite the bother of fittings, Drake had to admit the new styles suited him. Streamlined, manly and businesslike, the long trousers and cutaway coats were infinitely preferable to the fussy, effeminate styles of his boyhood.

For reasons Drake could not fathom, ever since the talk with his grandmother he’d felt a sense of confidence beginning to sprout within him. Perhaps it was the unexpected discovery of the fondness and respect she bore him. Or perhaps it was her salty common sense that in a long life had looked on many tempests and been little shaken.

“So your bride believes her heart is buried with her first love?” The marchioness had chuckled privately, recalling a time when she had been full of naive idealism. “Heaven spare any woman the grief

of marrying her first love! Those qualities that make a girl's silly heart flutter are not the kind that stand even the mildest test of time."

"You don't understand, grandmother," Drake protested, anxious not to betray too much of the truth. "This man was everything I am not. While it is true his charms might have paled if he'd lived, he is now beyond criticism. Beyond competition."

"Pshaw! You hold the trumps in this hand, my lad. Your Lucy sounds too sensible a girl to cling to a ghost when she can have a living man of flesh and blood. Let her know your feelings have changed, and that you will no longer settle for the crumbs of her affection. I wager you'll find her more than willing to make a go of this marriage, if you are."

He'd promised he would try. The first step must be getting them both out of London and back to Silverthorne where they could be alone, without the constant presence of Phyllida and that benighted bounder, Dalrymple. Once they were back at Silverthorne he would begin to show Lucy how his feelings had altered and...

A rustle of muslin.

Drake looked up in time to see Lucy descending the staircase, a vision in the most breathtaking confection of a gown he had ever contemplated. A soft rose color with the fashionable high waist that hid any sign of her condition, it had a filmy pink overslip embroidered with rosebuds. If there was a goddess of springtime, Drake could only imagine she must look just so.

Catching sight of him, Lucy bit her lip smiling uncertainly. Drake realized his mouth had fallen open.

"Will I do for Henley House?" She murmured cast her eyes downward then looked up at him through her luxuriant lashes.

Drake felt his tongue turn to stone and his innards to quivering jelly. There could be no question of waiting for their return to Silverthorne. He must set about winning this woman tonight. Nothing in his life had ever felt so imperative.

"Well?" Lucy promoted him expectantly. "Am I presentable for our last night in London?"

"Yes." He felt like an ass. The way she looked, the way she made him feel, he should be spouting poetry worthy of Shakespeare. Not a word of more than a syllable would enter his head.

"Quite," he managed to add, mentally berating himself. "Your gown is very... it's new, isn't it?"

“Do you think it cost too much? I felt faint when the seamstress told me the price, but Phyllida says all the ladies in London spend...”

Bewildered at her onrush of words, Drake regretted that his stupid fumbling had caused her to reach such a conclusion. Now, even the simplest utterances deserted him. For lack of any other recourse, he hushed her with the softest pressure of his forefinger against her lips.

Only when the tender flesh trembled slightly beneath his fingertip did Drake realize his error. Lucy feared him, and he had given her cause. Now, if he hoped to make any progress with her, he would have to move slowly and deliberately. He could not afford to unleash his straining passion again and risk frightening her off again.

Wrenching his hand back as though her lips had scorched his skin, he stammered, “Spend... what you like. Lord knows... we’ve money enough. The gown is... lovely.”

He winced at the sound of his own words. *Lovely*? What a tepid, commonplace, two-a-penny word to describe how she looked. For the first time, Drake yearned with all his heart for even a scrap of his late brother’s ingenuous charm.

But not for the last.

In spite of his resolve to win Lucy, or perhaps because of it, his efforts went awry at every turn. Dance partners flocked to her until Drake found himself shunted aside. He fumed in silence as he watched her gliding through the steps, a smile of genuine pleasure lighting her lips and eyes. As the music concluded and a bevy of swains rushed up to claim the honor of the next dance, Drake shouldered his way through the press.

He fixed the importunate gentlemen with the legendary Silverthorne glare. “Is it thought bad manners nowadays for a man to dance with his *own* wife?”

Lucy’s admirers dispersed like a covey of quail set upon by a bloodhound.

“Do you wish to dance?” Suppressed amusement twinkled in her eyes. “I thought I was sparing you the obligation.”

“We will dance.” The words came out like a curt command, not at all as he’d intended.

He moved woodenly through the steps. If he allowed himself to look too long at Lucy or savor the touch of her hand, he might lose

concentration and trip over his own feet. By the time he had stomped through two sets, treading at least once on Lucy's toes, he was ready to explode with vexation at himself.

"I could do with a dipper of punch." She sounded eager for any excuse to remove herself from the peril of his clumsy dancing.

"Punch. Of course." Eager to redeem himself by doing her bidding, he rushed to return before she was once again mobbed by prospective partners. In his haste, Drake jostled the rotund Earl of Weymouth. Struggling to regain his balance, he lurched toward Lucy. The entire contents of the punch glass splashed down the front of her new gown.

She gasped, staring at her sodden skirt. A furious blush rose in her cheeks. Her eyes held Drake in a gaze of wounded puzzlement that made him feel a thousandfold more culpable.

"So sorry... my... dear." He fumbled with his handkerchief, daubing at her gown. "Deucedly clumsy of me. Shall I call for our carriage?"

As Lucy swept past him, she spoke just loud enough for him to hear. "If you wished to go home, you might have asked rather than subjecting me to this humiliation."

Chin tilted proudly, she walked to the staircase and mounted the steps with deliberate dignity.

A harsh profanity rose to Drake's lips. He swallowed it again as his gaze met the triumphant smirk and insolently cocked eyebrow of Eugene Dalrymple. With languid grace, the young dandy pivoted on the toe of his silver-buckled shoe and strolled to the foot of the staircase. There he lounged, sipping his punch and patiently eyeing the stairs for Lucy's return.

Drake cursed aloud.

When the prim Countess of Weymouth bleated in protest, he skewered her with a piercing glare and strode to take up a post opposite Dalrymple. It was a futile gesture, he knew, but one which Silverthorne honor demanded.



Relieved to find the tiring room blessedly deserted, Lucy took a linen towel from the wash stand and pressed it to her damp skirt. Alternately, she mopped the moisture then shook out the fabric to coax it dry.

Fixing herself with a critical look in the glass, Lucy chuckled. If Drake had to douse her with liquid, thank goodness he had chosen a champagne punch. And thank goodness her new gown was made of muslin, not silk.

What had got into Drake tonight? Seldom had she seen him so stiff and self-consciously solicitous, as if he might be trying to salve his conscience. The familiar frost of suspicion chilled Lucy's heart. At the same time, her womanly pride reared.

If he had done something of which he was ashamed, let him atone for it without spoiling her last evening in London. Given the choice between his usual aloof neglect and tonight's awkward attentiveness, Lucy wondered if she did not prefer the former.

Shaking her head, she heaved an exasperated sigh and slipped behind the screen to relieve herself. She had just finished when she heard the door open and two loudly chatting ladies enter. Having no inclination to be caught again as she had during Phyllida's impromptu tea party, Lucy began to clear her throat to signal her presence. A remark from one of women stopped her.

"Did you see it? The whole glass of punch down the front of his wife's gown! The years haven't cured Silverthorne of his boorishness. Aren't you glad you didn't marry him after all?"

Lucy froze. If these ladies discovered her now, it would be ten times more embarrassing than on the other occasion.

"Oh, I don't know." The second woman mulled over the idea. "Who would have guessed he'd grow so very rich. Handsome too, for all his lack of refinement."

"Are you saying you're sorry you eloped with Lucius?"

"Of course not. Lucius was so amusing, always the perfect gentleman. It is true what they say about Drake Strickland, he is nothing but a tradesman with a title."

Both ladies burst into high-pitched squeals of laughter over this malicious quip. After lampooning several more of their acquaintances and checking that their petticoats were not showing, the giddy pair left Lucy in peace. After a decent interval she followed, her thoughts churning.

Small wonder Drake had been so reluctant to marry after having his pride, and possibly his heart, mauled by that razor-clawed cat. Small wonder he acted so ill at ease in aristocratic society.

Tradesman with a title. True, Drake had little in common with the general run of noblemen who showed no interest in anything

beyond their own pleasure. He'd been much more convivial with his foremen and the miners' families at High Head than among the aristocratic parasites of high society.

At the top of the stairs, Lucy paused to draw a deep breath. In the ballroom below she could see Drake and Mr. Dalrymple positioned like a pair of sentries on either side of the steps. For a moment her heart lifted at the sight of Eugene Dalrymple. No doubt he would have some ready quip to deflect gossip and diffuse her embarrassment.

Marking the black look Drake directed at the younger man, Lucy thought back to the conversation she'd just overheard. Suddenly she guessed the reason for his animosity to Mr. Dalrymple. It had probably been just such a mannerly, amusing lightweight who'd robbed young Drake of his fiancée and made him a laughingstock of the *ton* to this day.

Surely he could not believe she would ever humiliate him in such a way? With a flutter of chagrin, Lucy reluctantly admitted she might have given him reason to doubt her.

Well, no more.

Working up the pretense of a carefree smile, she glided down the stairs, steeling herself to run the gauntlet of raised eyebrows and covert smirks. As she stood on the last step, Mr. Dalrymple turned to her. Taking her hand, he swept her an exaggerated bow.

"I kneel in awe of your poise, Queen Lucy. Beautifully recovered, indeed. Shall we take the floor and show the company that it takes more than a little wetting to quench your grace and vivacity?"

Though he sounded entirely sincere, Lucy could not help thinking that a subtle shift of inflection might turn his impeccable compliment into biting sarcasm.

Coolness infused her reply. "Tempting as I might find your invitation, sir, I fear I must decline."

Withdrawing her hand from his grasp, she turned to Drake. "My husband still owes me a drink of punch and I mean to collect on my debt."

Ignoring Drake's dumbstruck look, she took his arm and spoke teasingly. "Shall I help *you* to a glass, dear husband? I promise to refrain from wetting you down, provided I don't catch you casting admiring looks at the other ladies."

She could feel the tightly wound tension in Drake's body begin to ease.

“A simple enough feat when I have you to look on.”

It was not a very eloquent compliment compared with the verbal confections of Mr. Dalrymple... or Jeremy. Yet the very economy of Drake's words and the tone of tender earnest with which he uttered them made his tribute precious to Lucy. Strange sweet warmth swept through her.

Fluttering her lashes to dispel an inexplicable stinging in her eyes, she tried to speak past the bewildering constriction of her throat. “Flatterer! I do not mean to let you off that easily. This is our last night in London and you owe me a good time. I have been very patient these weeks while you've skulked away to talk politics, leaving me to the company of any gentleman who might offer me a dance out of pity. So I give you fair warning—you are mine for the night.”

With exaggerated care, he helped her to another glass of punch. Then he tipped his own glass toward her. “I am entirely at your service, my lady.”

The heat in Drake's dark gaze rekindled a wild yearning which had flamed in Lucy on that night at *The Black Cygnet*. Would he make such an offer, she wondered, if he had any idea how far she might press it?

Chapter Eighteen

DRAKE MIGHT HAVE suspected he was dreaming that night at Henley House except for one thing. Never in his life had he dreamed anything half so wonderful. It was quite beyond the bounds of his practical, limited imagination. He'd steeled himself for Lucy to spurn him when she returned to the company. He fully expected her to lap up Dalrymple's fluent compliments and then to take the floor on his arm.

Never would he have dared to hope she might turn to him with a gentle rally and the improbable gift of a second chance. Whatever angel had intervened on his behalf, Drake could only thank providence from the bottom of his heart.

As the night wore on, it became increasingly clear that his wife had resolved to think well of anything he might say or do. She praised his barely adequate dancing, coaxing him to take the floor with her again and again. She hung upon his most banal utterances, laughing merrily at his feeblest jests. Most pleasant of all, she held his arm at every opportunity as though she never meant to let him go. What it all meant, he felt too puzzled and befuddled with happiness to cypher out.

Was there no boon so rare that Fate would deny it to him this night? And did he dare to test the ultimate limits of whatever benevolent enchantment had overtaken him?

Drake was so reluctant to risk breaking the spell that they were among the last guests to leave Henley House. After they had gone, their hostess turned to her husband, her eyes shining fondly. "I don't know when I've seen such a devoted pair. We must be sure to invite them again whenever they come to London."



Drake was even quieter than usual on their carriage ride home, but Lucy sensed a different quality to his silence. It had none of the cold, mute antagonism of previous nights when they'd returned from social engagements. Social engagements where she had kept company with Mr. Dalrymple. Tonight he appeared content to listen as she prattled on a tad nervously about the superior company and

entertainment of the Henley set.

She was conscious of him watching her, with approval and admiration at once more subtle and more sincere than the overt regard of Mr. Dalrymple. Though she scarcely knew what to make of it, Lucy could not help savoring his appreciative scrutiny, after so many weeks of unspoken censure. Liberated by the knowledge that her fancy for him was no more than a curious quirk of her pregnancy, she allowed herself to imagine making love with her husband.

Compelling images flashed in her thoughts like bolts of lightning. She felt herself growing more and more aroused. Gradually the effort to keep her tone of voice casually animated became too great and she lapsed into silence. Even then she had difficulty keeping her rapid breathing from betraying her suppressed desire.

The young footman who admitted them to the house on Grafton Square looked ready to fall asleep on his feet. An early spring dawn was not many hours away.

"Off to bed with you, lad," Drake ordered, after the footman had taken their wraps.

"Won't you be wanting your port in the library, milord?" The boy tried to stifle a yawn.

Drake shook his head. "I have too much wine punch in me already. I fear the port would not sit well on top of it. I should hate to end a pleasant evening my shooting the cat."

The footman hiccoughed with laughter at Drake's use of the fashionable slang for retching.

Lucy smiled too, though she did not believe her husband for a moment. Ever since that drunken night at *The Black Cygnet*, he'd been strictly temperate in his consumption of spirits. Tonight had been no exception. In recent weeks however, he'd taken to lingering downstairs with a glass of port while she retired to bed. Perhaps he'd wanted to avoid an awkward parting at her bedroom door.

Tonight he followed her up the stairs.

With every step, Lucy was achingly conscious of his presence so close behind her. Could he not feel the emanation of raw need that pulsed through her? It licked at her limbs and made her mouth alternately water and dry out. On the fourth stair from the top, her slipper caught on the hem of her gown and she faltered. Shadowing her so closely, Drake was on top of her before he could stop himself.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Righting herself, she clung to him. "It was my fault. I'm fine, truly."

Somehow they managed to ascend the final three steps, their bodies entwined.

If she did not get some relief soon, Lucy feared she might burst into flame. From a throat suddenly dry as parchment, she tried to dredge the words that would keep Drake with her.

Before she could master her wayward vocal organs, he spoke. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper, hoarse with his own desire. "Let me stay, Lucy. I beg you."

Before she could reply with her own plea, he rushed on as if to counter an expected protest. "I do not mean to go back on our original agreement. I know Jeremy's memory will always have first place in your heart. As for myself..."

She pressed her fingertips to his lips as he had done to her a few hours before. Just then she could not bear to hear Jeremy's name spoken, could scarcely bear to think of him at all.

"A man has needs." She finished his sentence, loathing herself for the worst kind of hypocrite. It was her own need, not Drake's, that compelled her.

With fumbling, trembling hands she turned the knob of her bedroom door and drew her husband inside. A dying fire in the hearth bathed the room with a soft, welcoming glow. The quilt had been turned down and her nightgown laid out. Silently leading Drake toward the bed, Lucy grappled with a sense of shame that threatened to smother her.

This was no betrayal of Jeremy, she sternly insisted to herself and almost believed it. She was simply seeking relief from the carnality brought on by her pregnancy, as well as submitting to the demands of her husband. By the law of Church and State, he had every right to her body. Conveniently forgetting how close she had come to begging him, Lucy absolved herself, determined not to repel him this time with any unseemly eagerness.

Nothing had prepared her for Drake's deliberate, restrained lovemaking.

With measured movements, he shed his coat. Loosening his stock, he unwound the white neck linen from around his bronzed throat. One by one, he unfastened the buttons of his waistcoat and then his shirt. Lucy watched the nimble manipulations with jealous attention. He slipped off the fitted knee boots of fine, supple

leather. Shrugging off his upper garments, he stood clad in only his narrow-legged trousers. The sight of him was almost too much for her. Lean, lithe and dark, he looked like some dangerous but compelling predator.

Now he turned his attentions to her and she could scarcely keep her knees from buckling. Deftly, he liberated each tiny pearl button that secured the back of her gown. Then, standing behind her, he laid a hand on each of her shoulders with no more pressure than a moth lighting on a rose petal. His lips found the exquisitely sensitive flesh of her neck. Skimming upward in a ticklish caress to the base of her ear, they began again on the other side.

Languorously, he eased the light sleeves off her shoulders and down her arms. The low-cut bodice of her gown parted company with her breasts. Silently, she willed Drake to touch them. She yearned for him to cup each ivory mound in his warm dark hands and flick his thumbs over the ruddy brown nipples, erect and pleading for his attention.

But he made no move to do so.

When the sleeves of her gown slid over her hands, Drake allowed nature to finish the task he'd begun. The garment continued to fall with leisurely grace, until it lay in soft folds around her ankles along with her chemise. Swallowing an immense lump in her throat, Lucy closed her eyes. Other than her stockings and slippers she stood quite naked, more completely exposed than she had ever been in her life. Her pulse raced in her ears and her whole body tingled, anticipating Drake's touch.

She sensed his movements behind her as he slowly drew off his trousers. Then he bent his concentration upon her once again. At the base of her neck, he bestowed a lingering kiss that made her heart clench in her chest. Slowly, maddeningly so, his lips traced a sinuous path down her back. She could feel the moist heat of his breath. Its ragged pace betrayed a fierce eagerness in sharp contrast to his leisurely seduction. Now and then his tongue would flick out, setting her senses quiver.

He dropped to his knees, his voyaging lips exploring farther south. Lucy steeled herself for the feel of his lips or his hands on the rounded, receptive flesh of her backside. He stopped short of that.

Instead he turned his face, pressing his cheek and silken side-whiskers into the small of her back. Lucy clenched her lips to stifle a groan of pleasure and almost intolerable yearning, but she made

no move. She had sworn to rein in her wanton urges and rein them in she must. If she drove Drake away now, when he had coaxed her to such a pitch of arousal, how would she bear the torture of such frustration?

She gasped when he touched her ankles, his hands traveling upward until they reached the rolled tops of her stockings. With a delicacy scarcely imaginable from hands so large and powerful, he inched the sheer silk down her legs, drawing off her slippers and her stockings. Completely disrobed at last, Lucy waited impatiently for what would come next.

Suddenly deprived of his touch, she strained to hear what Drake was doing. Unable to bear the suspense, she opened her eyes. There he stood, silhouetted against the dim glow from the embers in her hearth, a magnificent creature all taut, lean strength and dark, brooding potency. Though she longed to explore his body with her hands and lips, she did not trust herself.

With a smoldering intensity in his gaze, he nodded toward the bed. Lucy sank down gratefully not certain how much longer her quivering limbs could have sustained her. She held out her arms to Drake, wordlessly pleading with him to quench the ravenous desire he had so kindled. He stretched out beside her, cupping her head with one hand, while the other played over her body at will. She prepared herself for a deep, demanding kiss like the ones she recalled from their wild night at the inn. It never came.

Instead his mouth hovered almost out of reach. He enticed her with fleeting, shallow kisses that made her strain toward him. His fingertips, those sweet, capricious tormenters!

All but ignoring those parts of her body that pleaded most desperately for his attention, they whispered over her skin, turning the hollow of her shoulder or the base of her lowest rib into the apex of sensual delight. Higher and higher he coaxed her until her very bones throbbed with excruciating need.

Forgetting the promise she had made to herself, forgetting everything in the world, she parted her legs, beseeching him to take her. Take her he did, in one deft, fluid motion, sliding home in a single smooth thrust. At the same instant his mouth clamped down on hers, muffling a cry that would have otherwise raised the whole house. For as Drake eased into her, Lucy lost herself in a rapturous, shattering release.

By degrees she returned to full consciousness and the blissful but

disconcerting sensation of being borne on a warm breeze like a wisp of thistledown. She found herself lying on her side, nestled in Drake's arms. Her cheek pressed to his chest where she could hear his heart racing. Why had he stopped? She wondered drowsily. Unless she had been misled by her meager experience with men, he had received no satisfaction from their coupling. Yet he did not make the slightest move, as if *her* pleasure had been his goal all along.

She wanted to say something, to give Drake a sign that would acknowledge the precious gift he had bestowed on her. But she could not sort out the contradictory emotions that vied for control of her heart. Neither could she understand why Drake had begged permission to make love to her, only to leave his own desires unappeased.

What an enigmatic creature he was, almost as unfathomable as the feelings he provoked in her.

She was still mulling it over when a deep, mellow drowsiness overtook her.



Only when he was certain she'd fallen asleep did Drake stir himself to twitch the bedclothes over them both. Still buried within her, he clasped Lucy to him. In the darkness he smiled to himself. Unless all he'd heard and what little he'd experienced of physical love was completely in error, he had just taken Lucy to a place few women voyaged. Certainly, it was *terra incognita* to him.

The strangest part was that he hadn't meant to do it. Though not altogether bereft of experience, he had never considered himself an accomplished lover. His temperate, almost chaste seduction of Lucy had risen from a desire not to frighten her. No torn clothes. No savage grappling. Nothing to stir distasteful memories of their first aborted encounter.

He had also refrained from speaking, for fear that anything he might say would only spoil it for them both. Afterward, when Lucy lay silent and spent, he had clasped her to him, satisfied that his body had spoken eloquently on his behalf.

In spite of his delight at having roused and sated the woman he adored, his own long-denied hunger now threatened to engulf him. In the faint light of that spring dawn, he could make out the

sumptuous contours of Lucy's body. The tempting fullness of her breast rose and fell gently in sleep. The subtle musk of her desire filled his nostrils. The tight, moist grip of her intimate embrace carried him to the brink of madness... and beyond, in a soundless, almost motionless climax of devastating intensity.

Chapter Nineteen

LUCY WOKE AROUND noon, or so she thought, roused by the singing of a lark outside her window. The little bird sounded as if he was bursting to warble his delight at returning home to England after a winter exile in warmer climes. For a moment Lucy wondered why her heart resonated with the same boundless joy and exultant sense of homecoming.

As she lay there, basking in an aura of sublime contentment, she felt the baby move within her for the first time. Her fragile peace of mind shattered like a bauble of spun glass dashed on a marble floor. Guilty tears stung in her eyes and uncertainty roiled in her heart once more.

Slumbering memories of her child's conception stirred, memories she had suppressed until this moment. Jeremy had tried to use her gently, knowing she was a maid. In the end he was overcome by his own need. Raining kisses on her face, he whispered hoarsely that he loved her and that it would soon be over. He'd lied. By the time he gave one final grunting thrust and rolled off her, she was whimpering like a wounded animal.

For months she had thrown a rose-colored curtain over those memories. Now they surged back to life, raw and shameful. Over and over, she'd insisted to Drake and to herself that she would never regret what she had allowed Jeremy to do. Now she was no longer sure of that or of other old certainties.

Was it possible she had grown to love her gruff, pensive husband, the complete opposite of his boyishly engaging half-brother? And what were Drake's feelings for her? Had they also changed since the day the two of them had made their foolish compact never to burden one another with unwanted affection?

As Lucy wrestled with those vexing questions, a rapid, insistent tapping sounded on the door of her bedchamber. For an instant her heart leapt, thinking it might be Drake. Then she realized the sharp, staccato knock could not possibly come from him. Lucy almost called out to bid the person enter. The words caught in her throat as she realized she was naked beneath the bedclothes.

Scooping up her nightgown, she pulled it over her head. "A moment, please. I just woke up."

She donned a warm wrap and slippers then opened the door to Phyllida.

Drake's cousin eyed her disheveled hair with ill-disguised interest. Lucy felt herself blushing. Like most ladies of the time, she made a ritual of brushing and braiding her hair for bed, no matter how late the hour. Following Phyllida's gaze to the pile of discarded evening clothes beside the bed, she blushed deeper still. Mixed up with her ball gown and underclothes, were Drake's stock and waistcoat.

Her eyes fixed on the garments, Phyllida's mouth opened and closed several times. Finally, she managed to gasp, "What time did the two of you get in this morning? When you didn't come down to breakfast, I thought I should see if you were ill."

"Aside from being a little tired, I am quite well, thank you." Lucy sternly reminded herself that Drake's clothes on her floor should not be any cause to blush. They'd been married for months now and during that time they had gone out of their way to convince his cousins they were physically intimate.

But that had been playacting. This was not. In spite of the wedding band on her finger, it felt furtive and illicit.

"I only thought..." Phyllida continued to stare at the telltale pile of clothes. "That is, Drake said you would be leaving today. And you haven't anything packed."

Lucy shrugged. "Perhaps we will wait until tomorrow."

Seeing Phyllida's tight little smile of triumph, she could not keep from adding, "Or perhaps I will throw some traveling clothes into a trunk and you can send the rest of our baggage on later."

"I suppose it will depend on how long Drake takes with his interview." A note of sly triumph sounded in Phyllida's reply.

"Interview?" Lucy knew she should not rise to the bait, but she couldn't help herself.

"I thought perhaps you were aware of it."

"I was not." Turning from Drake's cousin, Lucy began to pick up the fallen clothes and fold them. "No doubt it is some Parliamentary business or other he has to finish before we leave."

Phyllida chuckled, a sound that made Lucy's skin crawl. "I know of no women who sit in the House of Lords."

When Lucy persisted in ignoring her, she snapped, "Are you not going to ask me who he's seeing?"

Lucy pretended to busy herself with choosing travelling clothes.

“Why ask when I know you’ll tell me in any case?”

“I feel it is my duty as I am so very fond of you,” said Phyllida, without a trace of warmth. “It’s that actress, remember? The one you asked about that night at Covent Garden.”

A cold dagger of dread slashed at Lucy’s entrails. “I remember.”

“She arrived out of the blue half an hour ago, demanding to see Lord Silverthorne. They have been together in the library ever since, with the door shut.”

“Then by all means go and press your ear to the keyhole, Phyllida. I am content to wait until my husband informs me what Mrs. Beaumont wanted.”

“But, Lucy, I only thought—”

“You only thought it a pity to waste this opportunity to stir up trouble between Drake and me before we return to Silverthorne. Save your breath, Phyllida. My husband is the most honorable man I know and I trust him completely. No doubt there is a perfectly innocent reason for Mrs. Beaumont’s call. Now if you will excuse me, I must dress and get packed.”

She all but pushed a sputtering Phyllida out the door. Then Lucy sank onto the bed, fighting to make herself believe her own vehement protestations. If she did not care for Drake, why on earth should she mind what was going on in the library?



“You are quite certain of this?” Torn between disbelief and outrage, Drake stared at the woman sitting across from him.

“As certain as any woman can be, Lord Silverthorne.” Rosalind Beaumont allowed herself the ghost of a smile. She was dressed rather too fashionably for a morning call, in a pale green gown and darker green jacket that set off her fair complexion perfectly. A tiny scrap of a bonnet hid little of her plentiful dark hair. “The child I am carrying belongs to your late brother.”

“Half-brother.” Never before had Drake made that distancing distinction. “Forgive me, ma’am, but you must understand my skepticism.”

She inclined her head slightly to acknowledge his point. “I did not come here to make wild claims I cannot support, your lordship. I can provide you with proof of everything I’ve said.”

“I fail to see how that is possible, under the circumstances.”

Rummaging in her reticule, she drew out several badly creased letters and passed them to him. "I trust you recognize the writing?"

Drake gave a convulsive nod, not trusting himself to speak. It was an unsettling sensation to see unfamiliar words penned in a familiar hand, now dead. Somehow they brought the writer momentarily to life. No question the writing was Jeremy's. The spiky, boyish penmanship and effortless fluency gave him away at a glance. The young fool had been smitten with Rosalind Beaumont, addressing her in disturbingly intimate term and making her any number of imprudent promises, including marriage. Had Jeremy truly believed that his brother would sanction a match to an actress several years the boy's senior?

Exasperation with Jeremy sharpened Drake's tone. "I'm willing to concede my brother was in love with you, Mrs. Beaumont. As for the rest..."

With obvious reluctance, she surrendered one final letter. Dispatched from Spain, it bore a date only days before Jeremy's death. It mentioned their *special night together* and once again hinted at marriage, without actually asking for her hand. Drake felt his stock growing increasingly tight around his neck. Between Lucy and Mrs. Beaumont, his brother's final leave had been most... productive.

Somehow his hard-headed practicality asserted itself. "Very well. He was in love and you took him into your bed."

"What further proof can you need?"

"At the very least I need to be certain that what you say about your condition is true."

Eyes blazing, the actress rose from her seat. Drake assumed she meant to flounce off in high dudgeon. By the time it dawned on him that she was lifting the hem of her gown, he was too astonished to even avert his eyes. For a moment she stood there with her gown kilted up to her bosom and her rounded belly exposed. Along with much else besides.

Hearing a gasp, Drake assumed it was his.

"Convinced?" She twitched her clothing back in place and resumed her seat.

"A-and you are certain no other man could have fathered your child?"

For the first time during their interview, her self-control looked in danger of faltering. "By rights I should slap your face for that

question, Lord Silverthorne. Unfortunately, I cannot afford to. I fear you have only my word that I had no other lovers but Jeremy. Despite what you may have heard about actresses, we are no less moral than other women.”

“I count myself a fair judge of character, Mrs. Beaumont. I withdraw the question with my apologies.”

Drake thought he detected a momentary tremor of her chin.

“What do you need from me?” he asked.

She reached back into her reticule, this time producing a handkerchief. “I am not accustomed to asking for charity, sir. I would never stoop to it on my own account. But for the sake of Jeremy’s child, I am prepared to swallow my pride.”

“I can understand that.” Drake caught himself in a sigh. He had to admire Jeremy’s taste in women and envy the devotion he inspired. Almost as much as he abhorred the way his brother had treated them.

Rosalind Beaumont’s green eyes searched his and appeared to approve what they found. “I want to raise this child, Lord Silverthorne. I’d given up hope of ever having one. When I realized my condition, it was as though your brother had left me a parting gift.”

Drake bit back a sardonic quip. Who was he to strip this woman of her romantic illusions?

“I refuse to farm my baby out and scarcely ever see it. However, to raise an illegitimate child openly would spell the end of my stage career. I have a little money put by, but nowhere near enough to retire on.”

“Set your mind at rest, Mrs. Beaumont.” Now that he was convinced of her story, he could at least spare her the final humiliation of asking for his help. “I will not see my brother’s child in want. I commend your decision to raise it yourself.”

He turned to the writing desk behind him and jotted down a number on a scrap of paper. “Will this capital sum in trust provide a sufficient income?”

When he handed it to her, the woman stared at the paper with widening eyes. “I had no intention of asking for so much, Lord Silverthorne. It is not my wish to use my child for financial gain.”

“Of course not. But prices continue to rise. I want Jeremy’s child to enjoy a comfortable upbringing and the finest possible education. I also feel you should be compensated for giving up your stage

career. Have you given any thought to where you'll go?"

"I mean to stay in London until the child is born and I can arrange to let my house. Then I shall find a quiet country village in Devon or the Cotswolds where no one will know me. I will claim I'm an officer's widow."

"Close enough to the truth." Drake nodded. "I would be honored if you and your child decide to bear the Strickland name."

She broke down then, so abruptly and completely that Drake could not resist reaching out to her. Kneeling on the floor by her chair, he held the weeping woman to his shoulder until her tears subsided. Before Lucy, he never would have dared make such a personal gesture. His wife had nurtured a side of him that Drake had never suspected, let alone taken pains to cultivate. Yet he knew he was a better, happier man for it.

When she finally mastered her turbulent emotions, Mrs. Beaumont seemed eager to conclude the interview. Drake promised to postpone his departure from London until he had consulted his solicitors and arranged a mutually agreeable settlement. Peering out around the library door, he satisfied himself that the hall was empty. He tried not to betray his haste to get Mrs. Beaumont out of the house.

On her way out, she turned and grasped his hand. "Bless you, sir." She spoke in a choked whisper. "Your generosity is legendary, but those reports scarcely do you justice. Your permission to use the Strickland name is more precious to me than all the money in the world. Your wife is a fortunate woman indeed."

His wife. Here was his chance to wrest Lucy from his brother once and for all. He could introduce her to Rosalind Beaumont. He could show how Jeremy had used her, going straight from her arms to the bed of another woman, passing false promises of marriage as his romantic currency.

The actress gave him a strange look. "I'm sorry, your lordship. Was it something I said?"

Drake shook his head to dispel the rash impulse. He knew of other captains of industry who had clawed their way to the top by ruthlessly destroying all competition. That had never been his way. Whether in business or matters of the heart, Drake wanted to succeed on his own merits, not by eliminating his rivals.

Besides, how could he face himself if he gained Lucy's love at the cost of her fragile romantic ideals? How might she feel about

herself, knowing the man she'd worshipped had exploited her with such casual indifference?

"I attach only one condition to our arrangement, Mrs. Beaumont."

"Yes?" She looked wary, as if unsettled by the sudden intensity in his voice.

"My wife must know nothing about this."

"You have my word."



As Lucy wilted onto the second step above the staircase landing, her thoughts resonated with Drake's parting words to Mrs. Beaumont.

"My wife must know nothing about this."

Talk of shutting the barn door after the horse had bolted!

It was her own fault for eavesdropping. Listeners seldom overheard anything good. Not that she'd meant to spy on Drake. On her way to fetch a small trunk for packing, she'd happened to overhear a couple of the maids gossiping.

"Just had a quick peek in the keyhole and I thought I'd faint dead away. There she was hauling her dress off in our library in broad daylight!"

"Never!"

"Swear it on my life."

When the girls had moved out of earshot, Lucy could not keep herself from perching on the stair landing. From there she had a clear view of the library door, while remaining all but hidden herself. Though it could not have been more than ten minutes before Drake and that woman emerged from the room, it felt like hours to Lucy as she made up her mind and changed it a hundred times.

She was so absorbed in the debate with herself, that the sound of the library door opening made her start guiltily. She eased farther back into the concealing shadows of the upper stairway. Though she could not make out much of the exchange between her husband and the actress, the urgency of their tone was unmistakable. Drake's final words floated up to her, distinct and emphatic, the last damning indictment to sway her verdict.

Yet against all the other evidence there stood one faint but stubborn hope. If Drake did care for the actress and she meant nothing to him, how could he have made such exquisite love to her

only hours before?

Suddenly Lucy could endure anything but guessing and wondering. After what had passed between them last night, she could not bear to look into Drake's regret-filled eyes or hear the harsh words of confirmation from his lips.

Whatever distasteful truth she must face, she would brave it better from a stranger.

As she tied on her bonnet, Lucy wondered how she could order a carriage and escort without alerting her husband. Just then, she heard a mannerly tap on the front door.

Thinking Mrs. Beaumont might have returned, she did not know whether to feel dismayed or relieved.

Lucy tugged the door open.

There stood Eugene Dalrymple, dapper in a high beaver hat, buff-colored trousers and a well-tailored coat.

"Lady Silverthorne!" He looked surprised and amused to find a viscountess answering her own door.

It did not take him long to regain his poise, however. Sweeping her a courtly bow, he offered a bouquet of posies.

"Please accept this humble token of my most abject apology and assurance of my continued regard."

"Apology?" Glancing nervously behind her Lucy took the flowers and stepped outside, quietly closing the front door behind her. "What on earth have you done that might require an apology?"

"Then you are not angry with me?" The anxious set of his eyebrows relaxed visibly. "Perhaps I have been foolishly sensitive. After you rebuffed my dance invitation last night and then went out of your way to avoid me... I concluded..."

Lucy clasped his hand. After what she had seen this morning, she could not bear the thought of causing anyone else emotional distress. "Of course I am not angry with you. Why you have been kindness itself to me ever since I arrived in London."

"It has been an honor and a pleasure, dear lady. Nothing could give me more joy than being of even the slightest service to you." He lifted her gloved hand to his lips.

Spying his carriage on the curb gave Lucy an idea. "You could do me a vital service this very moment, Mr. Dalrymple. I have an appointment at Covent Garden and no carriage at my disposal. Might I impose upon you for a drive?"

His handsome features blossomed into an expression of utter

felicity. It put Lucy in mind of how Jeremy had looked the day she'd agreed to a tryst in the woodlands near Silverthorne. For some reason that made her uneasy.

Her budding doubts dissipated when Mr. Dalrymple replied, "I am entirely at your disposal, dear lady."

After a brief word to his driver they were off.

"What a fortunate coincidence," said Mr. Dalrymple. "It leads me to wonder if Lady Fate may have taken me in hand."

"I beg your pardon?" Lucy buried her face in the posies to avoid the intensity of his gaze.

"I had hoped for a private word with you," he replied, "and what could be more private than this?"

Lucy glanced around the tastefully appointed interior of the carriage. She was suddenly aware of the grave breach in propriety she was committing by driving alone with a man other than her husband. Steeling herself against such thoughts, she decided it was no greater indiscretion than Drake *entertaining* an actress in their library.

"You will have to speak quickly," she said. "We will soon reach Covent Garden."

When the carriage made a sudden right turn onto King Street, Lucy cast Mr. Dalrymple a questioning look. "This is not the way. Please Mr. Dalrymple, it is urgent I get to the theater."

"All in good time, my dear Lady Silverthorne. " He waved her objections away. "I instructed my driver to take us on a short detour through Hyde Park. I trust you would not deny me ten minutes of your time when we may not meet again for who knows how long."

Lucy tried to summon the indignation she knew should readily rise, but it flickered and died in the face of that charmingly wistful smile and entreating eyes.

"Oh, very well." She gave an indulgent sigh. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Something I have longed to say from the moment we met. First, though, I must tell you some important news. I have just this hour received word from Florence that my aunt, the Duchess of Swansea, has died. I expect to sail for the Mediterranean tomorrow at the latest."

Though he looked far from heartbroken by the news, Lucy expressed her sympathy for his loss.

"I shall miss the old girl, but it was hardly unexpected. Most fortuitous, in fact. As my aunt's sole heir, I am now possessed of a fortune at least the equal of your husband's"

"How fortunate for you. I trust your new wealth will ease your grief." Lucy could not fully censor a note of scorn from her voice.

"Don't you see, Lucy?" Kneeling on the floor of the carriage, he took her hand. "Now that I have come into my inheritance, I am free to tell you how ardently and passionately I love you. Say you'll sail with me tomorrow and we shall live like royalty in the courts of Europe."

After an instant of complete shock, Lucy found her voice at last. "Do get off the floor, Mr. Dalrymple."

She wrenched her hand away. "And kindly refrain from addressing me in such a manner. I will thank you to remember that I am a married woman."

He made no move to rise. "A loveless marriage to that awkward excuse for a viscount. I know how miserable you are with him. He does not begin to deserve you."

"You have no idea what my husband deserves, sir. Now stop spouting this foolishness and take me home at once."

Instead Mr. Dalrymple took her face in his hands and kissed her. Such a thorough, practiced, expert kiss might have turned another woman's knees to water. It only made Lucy's gorge rise as high as her temper.

"Let go of me, Mr. Dalrymple and stop this carriage so I can find my own way home. Driver! Stop now!"

The gentleman backed off slightly, though he did not resume his seat. Remorse and affront plainly warred for control of his handsome features. "I must apologize, dear lady. It never occurred to me that you might not return my feelings. Now I fear you are upset. Here, take my handkerchief."

The white cloth fluttered before Lucy's face followed by an explosion of pain and darkness.

Chapter Twenty

“GONE?” DRAKE SPUTTERED. “What do you mean, gone?”
“It is a common enough word,” replied Phyllida, her tone uncommonly sharp. “I mean Lucy is nowhere to be found and no one has the slightest idea where she might be.”

Drake felt as if someone had just pulled a very comfortable chair out from under him. Still, he tried to sound casual. “Perhaps she thought of some last minute purchases she needed to make before we leave for Silverthorne. Did you check if she took one of the carriages?”

“That was my first thought.” Phyllida shook her head, denying that possible explanation.

“When was the last time anyone saw her?”

Phyllida thought for a moment before answering. “Martin saw the two of you when you returned from Henley House, but none of the servants saw her this morning. I should say that makes *you* the last to see her. You don’t suppose she went out before the servants were stirring this morning?”

“She was still here at six.” He refused to elaborate, though Phyllida’s blatantly curious stare all but demanded it.

At six he had slipped out of Lucy’s bed and stolen away. He hadn’t known what he should say to her when she woke. He feared whatever he said would be wrong.

“Are you telling me no one in this house has seen Lucy between then and now?” he demanded gruffly.

“I have asked everyone.”

“You didn’t ask me.” Young Reggie piped from the staircase. Traces of jam stained his mouth.

His mother threw up her hands in horror. “Reggie, darling, get back to the nursery this instant!”

“Oh, Mama, I’m too old for the nursery. I want to go away to school like other boys my age.”

Phyllida shook her head vigorously. “You know your constitution is much too delicate for the rigors of school. Besides, the good ones are so expensive.”

Drake might have laughed at their exchange, if he had not been so anxious about Lucy. “The boy has a point, Phyllida. It is high

time he went to school. I will cover his expenses.”

Reggie’s petulant frown spread into the most sincere smile Drake had ever seen on his round face.

“Now, Reggie, *I* am asking, did you see Cousin Lucy today?”

The boy bobbed his head. “Before noon. A man with yellow hair came to the door. Cousin Lucy went away with him in his carriage.”

“The man gave her flowers,” Reggie added helpfully.

“Did you see which way they went?” Drake managed to ask from a painfully constricted throat.

“That way.” The boy cocked his thumb in the direction of central London.

“Anything else you remember?”

“The horses were brown.”

“You’ve been a great help, Reggie. Thank you.”

The lad was scarcely out of earshot when Phyllida erupted. “Dalrymple! She’s bolted with Mr. Dalrymple and my poor impressionable Reggie had to see it all!”

“We don’t know it *was* Dalrymple,” Drake snapped. “And we certainly don’t know Lucy has bolted.”

Phyllida contemplated him with a look of pity usually reserved for harmless imbeciles. “Who else in London does she know well enough to accept a drive? The man certainly answers to Mr. Dalrymple’s description.”

“They may only have meant to exchange a few words of farewell.” Silently conceding the identity of Lucy’s escort, Drake wondered if this suggestion rang as hollow to Phyllida’s ears as it did to his.

Apparently so, for she nodded toward the clock in the east corner of the library. It showed the hour as half past three. “If that is the case, they are taking their own good time.”

Drake could not stand to continue this conversation. Desperately as he tried to pretend everything was all right, his heart screamed that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

“Go check her room. See if she took anything away with her. Ask Reggie if she was carrying any luggage when he saw her.”

After Phyllida had hurried away, clucking and fussing, Drake locked the library door and sank onto his chair. Was it possible that Lucy had eloped with that suave dandy? Had they planned it in advance? Was that why she’d let him into her bed last night, to allay his suspicions? Or had she fled on impulse, because he had

insisted on claiming his marital rights?

If he had driven her into the arms of a rogue like Eugene Dalrymple, Drake knew he would never forgive himself.



Lucy woke in the pale light of a spring dawn to the sound of a lark piping outside her window. For an instant she burrowed beneath the blankets, chuckling over the vivid but ridiculous dream she'd been having.

Then she felt the insistent throbbing in her head and smelled a dank, musty odor Lady Phyllida would never permit in 17 Grafton Square.

Cautiously, Lucy opened her eyes. Wherever she was, it bore no resemblance to her airy corner room in Drake's elegant town house. The dimensions of the two chambers were roughly comparable, but all similarity ended there. Instead of flower-sprigged wallpaper, this room had been paneled with dark wood—in Tudor times by the scarred look of it. In place of her bright chintz-covered chaise sat a sturdy wooden armchair of ancient pedigree. The lone window looked only half the size of her one at Grafton Square. Rather than soft damask draperies, it boasted a set of stout iron bars—the newest item in the room.

Holding her head and swaying from dizziness, Lucy staggered from the narrow tester bed to the door. It was locked securely from the outside. At the base of the door a slot had recently been cut and fitted with a hatch. Lucy knelt to inspect the dimensions of the hole. A small child or a dog might have been able to wriggle through, she decided. A grown woman, particularly a pregnant one, would not have a hope in the world.

Weaving her way to the window past the crumbling hearth and an archaic washstand, Lucy glanced outside. Her heart sank.

Even without bars, the three-story drop to the ground would have made the window an unlikely avenue of escape. The building that housed her prison room stood well back from a country lane, within sight but out of earshot. There were no other dwellings nearby. No one she could call for help.

Slowly Lucy wilted to the floor, tears of impotent rage and self-reproach stinging in her eyes. How could she have been so imprudent as to trust a scoundrel like Dalrymple, in spite of Drake's

warning? She had been misled by his good looks and facile gallantry.

This was not the first time she'd allowed herself to be deceived by appearances. How could she have imagined herself in love with a man she hardly knew? She'd been drawn by Jeremy's golden beauty and easy charm. In every way that counted, he'd been a stranger to her. If he had been half the peerless gentleman she imagined, he never would have pressured her to make love before she was ready.

Make love? A hiccup of tearful, ironic laughter broke from Lucy's lips. Jeremy Strickland hadn't made love to her in that secluded glade on the Silverthorne estate. He had made use of her body to satisfy his own needs with no thought at all about her feelings.

Drake had made love to her with no regard for himself. In the months of their marriage she had come to glimpse his true worth. Knowing Drake, there was probably much more to discover, all of it good. She had been a fool not to heed his warning about Dalrymple. She'd been wrong to suspect anything amiss between him and Mrs. Beaumont. If only she could find her way back to him...

The sound of approaching footsteps intruded on Lucy's thoughts. Hastily brushing her tears away, she scanned the room for anything she might use as a weapon. Her options were depressingly limited. Careful to make as little noise as possible, she pried a good-sized stone from the crumbling mortar of the hearth. Twisting it into a corner of her shawl, she wished for a clear shot at Eugene Dalrymple's golden pate. By heaven, she would repay him for the tender goose egg that throbbed behind her left ear.

The steps came to a halt on the far side of the door. The hinged hatch lifted to admit a small basket of food. Lucy held herself still as a statue until the steps began to retreat again.

Though she longed to berate her captor in the foulest possible language, she called out in as soft and appealing a voice as she could feign. "Mr. Dalrymple, is that you? Won't you come in so we can talk?"

The footsteps approached but Lucy heard no rattle of keys or lifting of the latch.

"Dear lady, awake at last," came the sickeningly familiar voice. "I trust you slept well."

If she could have reached his throat, she would happily have throttled him. Still, he represented her easiest means of escape.

With good cheer which she hoped did not sound too forced, she

replied. "Very soundly, thank you. If you brought me here to consider your proposal at greater leisure, I am sorry to have put you to the trouble. I had every intention of accepting you, eventually. I only protested at first for fear I might lose your respect by agreeing too readily. I am flattered you were prepared to take such extreme measures to win me."

"Nicely tried, dear lady." Dalrymple mocked her with exaggerated courtesy. "You would pretend to elope with me only to give me the slip at Dover."

Lucy cursed silently. How could she have hoped to dupe the master of duplicity?

"I would like to believe you if only to salve my wounded vanity," Dalrymple continued. "Though to be perfectly candid, your answer yesterday would not have influenced your present circumstances. This was our destination all along. Your reluctance simply forced me to employ less subtle tactics to secure your cooperation."

His oily mock-civility goaded Lucy worse than outright impudence. Like an over-wound spring, her composure snapped. "Villain! How dare you abduct me and hold me against my will? How long do you mean to keep me here? Are you aware that I am... in a delicate condition?"

"Indeed? If you think that will influence my actions, I regret to disappoint you. In fact, your... condition is an advantage to me, if anything. I doubt you would wish to endanger your unborn child in some foolish effort to escape. I can assure you we are miles from anywhere. Even if you were to find a way out of this house, you could not waddle far before I hunted you down. As for the length of your stay, that depends on how long it takes Lord Silverthorne to secure a Bill of Divorcement."

"Drake?" Lucy almost gagged on his name. "Do you mean to say he is behind all this?"

After a short pause, Dalrymple replied, "Very clever, dear lady. You have managed to trick more information from me than I meant to divulge. However, since you have I might as well tell you that I have been in your husband's employ from the moment we met. He is most anxious to sever your ill-advised union."

"Liar! Drake warned me away from you. He said he would not trust you to spell the word *sincere*."

Dalrymple sniggered. "As well he should know, having secured my services. Your husband is a surprisingly effective actor when

properly motivated. Of course, it was I who suggested he forbid you to consort with me. I thought it would create a repressive situation from which you might seek to escape.”

Lucy choked on her own furious retort. How could she stake her life on her faith in any man’s integrity? Hadn’t she proven herself gullible time and time again?

“Enjoy your breakfast, dear lady, and do make yourself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. I regret the amenities here are so... limited. I look forward to more of your delightful discourse when I return with your dinner.”

Slowly Lucy sank to the floor, sucked into a well of despair too deep for tears. Would her father believe she had abandoned her husband to run off with another man? How would he bear the disappointment and disgrace? And what would become of her child? Would Drake claim the baby and take him away from her as soon as she’d given birth? He would never see the child come to harm, that Lucy still believed. What of Mrs. Beaumont, though? Might Drake’s new wife view the child as a threat to hers? Infants were so vulnerable...

How long she crouched on the bare wood floor, alternately battered by hopelessness and self-reproach, Lucy could not tell. She only came to herself when the baby gave several insistent kicks.

Laying a hand on her belly, she rubbed it in sweeping circles. “You must be hungry, little one.”

Poking through the basket Dalrymple had left, she discovered four slices of coarse bread, a dried apple, cheese, a cold hard-boiled egg and a small pitcher of fresh milk. At least, her captor did not intend to starve her. Lucy ate the egg, the apple and half the bread, washing her breakfast down with the milk. Two pieces of bread she set aside with the cheese. She’d need an emergency supply of food, so as not to be altogether dependent on Dalrymple’s dubious mercy for nourishment.

Listlessly, she walked over to the window and stared out. Part of her mind registered the first swelling buds on the massive old oak tree. Its wide-flung branches almost brushed the house. Out on the road, a loaded hay wain trundled past. No doubt it was headed for the fodder market of some nearby town. Tugging up the moisture-swollen window sash, Lucy longed to call for help. Then she considered the consequences.

Even if the distant wagoner did hear her, the not-so-distant Mr.

Dalrymple surely would. Dependent on him for the necessities of life, she did not dare antagonize him. Besides, if a passerby heard her and came to investigate, the unctuous Dalrymple was quite capable of fabricating a plausible, innocent-sounding explanation. Frustrated beyond bearing, Lucy slammed her fist against the window casement. The wet, rotten wood splintered beneath the savage force of her blow.

A faint ray of hope flickered to life in her heart.

With no one but herself to consider, she might have lain on the bed and given up. She might have wallowed in the heartbreak of Drake's betrayal and the brutal shattering of all her romantic ideals. But she was not alone.

Some instinct warned her that she dared not risk giving birth to her child in this house. No longer certain whom she could trust, she *knew* she could not trust her captor. While she was in his power, her child would never be safe. No matter how difficult or dangerous, escape was imperative.

She could not afford to approach it in her usual impetuous manner, though. She needed to cultivate practicality, vigilance, and above all patience. She would get only one chance, so her plan must be fool-proof. With each passing day of her placid, uneventful captivity, Dalrymple would relax his guard until she was ready to make her move.



"Are you certain of all this?" Drake glanced up from the report he'd been reading. Even on this mild April day the ice of January gripped his heart.

"Certain as I can be, milord," answered the author of the report. He was a small man, with an agile, inquisitive air that had probably served him well on the force of the Bow Street Runners. "The trail was clear enough for a blind man to follow."

"I see you questioned the carriage driver. How did you manage to track him down?"

"Notice in the papers, milord, promising a small reward for information. That draws 'em out of the woodwork every time. One fellow correctly supplied me with details purposely omitted from the newspaper notice."

"I see. And he drove them around Hyde Park before continuing to

the river. Did that not strike you as odd?"

The man shrugged. "When you've been in this business as long as I have, you find out people do odd things. Often for reasons none of the rest of us can understand. I believe that driver is telling the truth about his passengers boarding a barque flying the Portuguese flag."

Once again Drake looked down at the report, written in a crabbed, barely decipherable hand. "The *Santa Inez*, bound for Florence, which cast off shortly after they boarded."

Neville had been listening to the exchange with uncharacteristic restraint. Now he could not keep his opinion to himself a moment longer. "What more evidence do you need, Drake? She ran off with Dalrymple on a ship bound for Florence..."

"...where he has wealthy relations," chimed in Phyllida. "I'm certain that will be ample evidence for Parliament."

"What business of Parliament's is my private life, exactly?" Drake strove to keep a rein on his temper. If his cousins kept it up much longer, he would be sorely tempted to smack their heads together. He'd suffered days of their ill-disguised gloating, and he doubted he could stand one minute more.

Neville stared at him as though he'd grown a second head. "It's the House that will decide whether or not you get your Bill of Divorcement, of course. It will be an open-and-shut case. Most of the Honorable Members got a chance to see your bride disporting herself all over London with Dalrymple."

"I don't recall asking for your opinion on any of this, Neville." Seeing Phyllida preen self-righteously, Drake widened his glare to include her. "Nor yours, madam. What will it take to dun it into your thick skulls that I have no intention of airing my private life before Parliament?"

Phyllida's narrow lower lip trembled and her watery eyes brimmed. "We are only thinking of you and the family name."

Placing his arm gingerly around her shoulder, Neville offered his handkerchief. He cast his cousin a reproachful look using Phyllida's tears as an excuse to get in one last dig. "She's right, old fellow. You are going to have to divorce Lucy one of these days. Why not now while public sympathy is running high for you and the press is keeping strangely quiet about the whole affair? If you let it go and then bring a bill forward later, it will dredge everything up again. Quickest mended, soonest forgotten, what? You need to put this

behind you and get on with your life.”

“Don’t!” Drake only realized at what volume he’d bellowed when Phyllida jumped back, emitting a strangled squeak. With every remaining shred of self-control, he resumed in a quieter, but no less menacing tone. “Don’t have the effrontery to lecture *me* on how I should live my life. There will be no divorce. The subject is closed. Now I would like a private word with Mr. Langstroth.”

The pair of them vacated the library, shamelessly milking Phyllida’s distress for the benefit of the investigator. When the door finally closed, Drake exchanged a glance with Langstroth. The two men shook their heads.

“I like the work you’ve done on the case thus far,” Drake said. “You have shown yourself to be thorough, discreet and trustworthy. Those are difficult virtues to come by singly let alone together.”

“Just trying to give good value for the pay, milord.”

“A policy I fully endorse. I have another mission I would like you to undertake on my behalf, if you are willing. How do you fancy spring in Italy?”

“I’ve always had a hankering to travel, milord. What sort of mission did you have in mind?”

Drake handed over a heavy envelope, well-sealed with wax. “I want to you to find my wife and give her this. The English colony in Florence is not very large. You should not have much trouble tracking her down through Dalrymple’s aunt.”

“Very good, milord. I’ll leave as soon as I can book passage.” Langstroth turned the envelope over several times in his hands. If he wondered about its contents, he did not ask.

“Don’t come back right away after you’ve delivered it,” Drake added. “Let Lady Silverthorne know you will be staying awhile and where she can reach you. If she requests your help, you are to give her whatever assistance she might need. I will compensate you handsomely for your trouble.”

“So, if she asks, I’m to bring her home to you?” Langstroth looked doubtful, as though he could not fathom a man willing to take back his errant wife.

Drake shook his head. “If she asks, you are to take her wherever *she* wishes to go.”

When his agent had gone, Drake dropped heavily into the nearest chair, raking a hand distractedly through his hair. The letter he had entrusted to Langstroth, accompanied by a large sum in gold, had

been the most difficult he'd ever written. He'd labored over it day and night, consigning draft after draft to the fire. Somehow, from the depths of his heart, he had dredged up the words to tell her something of what she meant to him.

Begging forgiveness for what he had done to her, he swore it would never happen again. And he meant every word. Wondrous as it had been to commune with her physically, that was but a small part of his love for her. Though it might exact a grueling cost from him to keep her at arm's length that is what he was prepared to do if only she would come back. Her presence in his life was all he asked.

Drake prayed that by the time his agent reached Florence, Lucy would have discovered Dalrymple's true character. Perhaps when he realized she was carrying another man's child, his passion would cool and she would see he was no fit father for her baby. Then, perhaps, she would return to Silverthorne.

Nursing that spark of optimism against all common sense, Drake returned to Nicholthwait a week later. There he immersed himself in business, working doggedly to keep himself from thinking. After each long day he would ride out for an hour or two, galloping over the steep roads as if to outrun the doubts that bayed at his heels.

As each week gave birth to the next and spring blossomed into summer in the Lake Country, Drake waited for news from his agent. With each passing day and no word, his hope suffered a painful and protracted death.

Chapter Twenty-one

“**H**URRY UP, DALRYMPLE, you vile bounder.” Lucy muttered to herself as she lay on the bed listening for the sound of his approaching footsteps.

Having spent three interminable months as a prisoner in this run down garret, she doubted she could tolerate another hour without going mad. Besides, her opportunities for escape were dwindling rapidly. By her own inexpert calculations the baby would soon insist on making his appearance. Fortunately her body had not yet become too unwieldy, but she could not count on that continuing. Nor could she risk the exertions of her escape bringing on labor.

It had taken almost two months of slow, painstaking preparation to ready everything for her flight. She’d pressed every available drop of moisture into service to keep the rotting wood of the window casement constantly damp. A splinter at a time, she had gouged out the weak frame around those sturdy iron bars. Now, a single push should send them hurtling to the ground below.

She’d torn her bed linen into strips. Braiding them together for strength and tying the lengths into a serviceable rope, she hoped to climb down it to safety. Ever since the first day of her imprisonment, she’d eaten only the perishable food from her meals. Any foodstuffs she could safely keep for a day or two, she had saved eating what she’d held back from the previous days. That way she always had emergency rations on hand.

Observation had been the final key to her plan. She knew Dalrymple had been right in boasting she could never reach safety on foot. With a bit of charcoal from the hearth, she’d drawn a crude calendar on a corner of the floor. For days she’d kept watch by the window to see if any traffic passed regularly. Her diligence had been rewarded. The hay wain she’d watched go past on her first morning of captivity was a regular weekly fixture. All she had to do was arrange to get out of the house on a Tuesday morning in time to catch a ride to town hidden in the pile of hay.

That had proven no mean feat.

Two weeks earlier, she’d been all set to put her plan into action. But Dalrymple had shown up so late with her breakfast that the hay wain had long since passed. He’d been bright and early the

following week but a heavy rainstorm had dissuaded Lucy from trying.

The weather this morning was perfect for her purpose. A light fog would mask her activities from any curious passersby. Not that it would matter if that blackguard Dalrymple didn't come soon...

Lucy could not stifle a squeal of frustration.

"Something the matter, dear lady?"

Dalrymple's words took her so much by surprise, she almost forgot what she meant to do next. Almost.

"Oooh!" she gave a deep bilious groan.

The footsteps drew nearer.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "What's going on in there?"

"What do you think, fool? My baby is coming, of course! Oooh! The pains have been getting worse for hours now. I didn't think you'd ever come." That part was true, at least. "Please go fetch me a midwife. You promised you would. Please. Oooh!"

She dredged up a most impressive groan from the depths of her bowels.

Lucy heard the sound of something hitting the floor, her breakfast no doubt. For a moment she feared Dalrymple might venture inside to attend her himself. She redoubled her thrashing and moaning.

"Yes. Yes. Stay right there."

During the past weeks, it had been Lucy's dubious pleasure to become well acquainted with her captor. What she had discovered frightened her deeply. In some ways he reminded her of a badly spoiled child. Behind his mask of exaggerated civility lurked a vicious temper, which flared when his will was thwarted. Their weeks of isolation had made it worse. Yet for all his cold-bloodedness, he'd betrayed a disquieting squeamishness about childbearing that puzzled Lucy.

At the moment, she thanked heaven for his exploitable weakness.

"Hold it in!" he cried. "I'll be back with the midwife before you know it."

He sounded in such a panic Lucy could scarcely keep her pretended sobs of pain from turning into hysterical laughter.

She kept up her charade of childbirth all the while she crept to the window and watched Dalrymple ride off. As soon as he was out of sight, she sprang into action. Tying a bundle of food in a sling over her shoulder, she secured the end of the plaited rope to one sturdy bedpost. Using the washstand as a light battering ram, she

pushed the iron bars free of the rotted window casement. They fell to the ground with a muted but satisfying thud.

When Lucy eased herself out the gaping hole where the window had once been, her nerve nearly deserted her. It was such a long way to the ground and she had no head for heights. But it was too late for second thoughts.

Inhaling as if it might be her last breath, she grasped the thick braid of linen tightly with her hands and her knees. Slowly she began hitching herself down. Teeth clenched together and every muscle of her body knotted with tension, she kept her eyes fixed on the stone wall before her as she descended.

After one heart-stopping moment when she feared her rope might tear, Lucy reached the ground safely. By the time she ran across the open field to the hedgerow she was panting, partly from the exertions of her escape, partly from heightened nerves and partly from a sense of imminent triumph.

Soon the hay wain would rattle slowly by and she would scramble aboard without its driver being any the wiser. Some minutes passed before an uneasy chill crept into her heart.

Where was the wagon? Could she have miscalculated the day? As a host of doubts assailed her, Lucy heard the distant pounding of hoof beats. For an instant her roiling stomach settled. Then she realized the approaching horse was far too light and fleet to be the farmer's lumbering dray.

Her worst fears took shape when Dalrymple rode by on a chestnut cob with the midwife riding pillion. A sob of vexation broke from Lucy's clenched lips. There could be no question of staying where she was. Soon Dalrymple would be after her.

But where to go? Lucy looked down the road. There must be a town that way, one large enough to host a weekly hay market. Had she any hope of reaching it before Dalrymple caught up with her? Not likely. Turning her face in the other direction, she set out. Somewhere this way she would find the farm that was home to her familiar hay wain.

Would Dalrymple find her before she found it?



Drake looked up from a ledger to see the compact figure of Mr. Langstroth entering the counting house. For a moment his pulse

sped up and the room wobbled dizzily in his vision. Then he marked the grim expression on the little man's freshly tanned face. Ruthlessly, Drake clamped down on that heady rush of hope.

"What news?" he asked, dispensing with the usual pleasantries. "Did you see my wife? Speak to her? Is she well? The baby?"

Avoiding Drake's demanding stare, Langstroth shook his head. "Wherever your wife is, Lord Silverthorne, I can assure you she is nowhere near Florence."

"Nowhere near...? That's absurd! That hired driver saw them boarding the ship." Could there have been a wreck? Barbary pirates? His blood fairly congealed with dread at the terrifying prospects.

"Oh, the *Santa Inez* made port in Florence right enough, milord. Your wife was not aboard, though. Nor Mr. Dalrymple, if that's his true name."

"What are you saying, man?"

"Well, milord, I poked around Florence awhile trying to track them down and not a sign. Finally I made contact with a man who works for the Duchess of Swansea. Turns out Her Grace *did* have a nephew named Eugene Dalrymple. But the young fellow died two years ago in Barbados."

"Then who was the man...?"

"Begging your pardon, milord, but I'd say that's what we have to find out next. That and where the pair of them left the *Santa Inez*. My guess is they disembarked as soon as their hired driver was out of sight. Someone went to a good deal of trouble to make it look like your wife eloped to Florence. I don't mind telling you, I smell something foul afoot."

Drake sat down hard on the high counting-room stool. His head spun with questions, possibilities and gut-wrenching fear.

"What do we do now?" This unexpected news had unsettled him to such a pitch that he could scarcely think.

"I reckon all we can do is to make a fresh start with the facts we know for certain. I'll hunt up that driver and question him again. Find out if anyone on the docks saw anything unusual that day. The trail will be cold after this many weeks, but it's all we have to go on. I take it you've had no communication from your wife. No ransom demands?"

The word *ransom* struck Drake like a hard, unexpected fist in the stomach. Mechanically, he shook his head.

"Would you be able to get away, milord? Come back to London and help me with my inquiries?"

"I have a day's work to settle then I'll come. In the meantime, I want you back in London pursuing the case. Do whatever it takes—more manpower, rewards for information, bribes."

How could he have neglected the possibility that Lucy might not have gone willingly? Drake berated himself. It had seemed so reasonable that she would forsake him for a man so much like Jeremy. "I won't rest until I get to the bottom of this."

"Very good, milord. I'll meet you back in London." Langstroth took several short strides toward the door before he stopped suddenly and scurried back. From the pocket of his coat he withdrew the sealed envelope he'd carried to the Mediterranean and home again, Drake's love letter to Lucy.

"Under the circumstances, I think you'd better hang on to this, milord."

After the agent had gone, Drake sat on the counting-house stool, slowly turning the envelope over and over in his hands. Try as he might, he could not keep them from trembling. Though it had tormented him to think of Lucy sharing a Florentine villa with a wealthy young scoundrel, it was worse having no clue where she might be or with whom.



Lucy brushed away a stalk of hay that tickled her nose, praying the chaff wouldn't make her sneeze. She had managed to reach the farm, a far nearer neighbor than she'd ever suspected. There in the lane, listing on a broken wheel, stood the loaded hay-wain. With not another living soul in sight Lucy dove into the pile of hay, covering herself completely. Cradled in the prickly, sweet-smelling cocoon under a star-strewn summer sky she had enjoyed her first peaceful sleep in months.

Bright and early that morning, the farmer and his son arrived and began to repair the old wagon. Willing herself to complete stillness, Lucy prayed they would soon finish and be on their way to town.

"Pardon me, goodman." At the sound of Dalrymple's voice, fear tightened around Lucy's throat. "Have you by any chance seen a young lady wandering this way? She is my sister, poor creature. Hasn't been right in the head since her husband was killed fighting

in Spain.”

“Haven’t seen no one.” The farmer did not bother to pause in his task.

Hardly daring to breathe for fear of discovery, Lucy still allowed herself the luxury of a faint smile. Clearly some people were immune to Dalrymple’s vaunted charm.

He did not let the brusque reception deter him. “If you do see her, I’d be obliged if you could return her to me at Vinelands. The poor dear is with child and due to deliver any day. I can’t imagine what made her run off. I shudder to think what harm might befall her if I do not recover her in time.”

Lucy shuddered to think what might become of her if Dalrymple *did* find her. Only when he had ridden off and the hay wain began its ponderous journey, did Lucy allow one silent tear after another slide down her cheeks.

Sometime later, seeing the open countryside give way to the fringes of a town, she heaved a deep sigh of relief. Surely, she could find one kind soul to hide her and help her reach the safety of her aunt’s house in Bath. Could she be so fortunate that this might be the outskirts of Bath itself? Certainly some of the buildings looked familiar.

But... wait.

With a start of amazement, Lucy realized they were not riding into Bath, but London. This must be Oxford Street. If the hay that concealed her was destined for Covent Garden or Smithfield, the old wagon would pass within yards of Grafton Square.

Finding herself unexpectedly back at the site of happier times overwhelmed Lucy with a surge of elation. Sanity had been restored and the past three months felt like nothing but an unpleasant nightmare from which she’d finally awakened.

Before she quite knew what she was doing, Lucy scrambled out of her hiding place and slid off the hay-wain when it paused in traffic. Brushing the chaff from her clothes and picking long straws from her hair, she hurried towards Number 17.

Only when she was practically on the doorstep did she realize that she might be walking straight into the lion’s den. After the measures he’d already taken to rid himself of her, what might Drake do if she suddenly appeared at his house? Would she find Mrs. Beaumont ensconced at Grafton Square or had Drake taken his beautiful mistress back to Silverthorne?

As Lucy paused to consider a wiser course of action, a hired carriage pulled up before Number 17 and a man hastily alighted. Lucy instantly recognized Eugene Dalrymple. For a split second she froze like a wild creature caught in the sites of the hunter's musket. Then she dove for cover into the narrow alley that led to the mews behind Drake's townhouse.

Pressing herself back against the bricks, she prayed that Dalrymple had not noticed her. Gradually over the deafening pounding of her own heart she heard voices, agitated, angry voices. Lucy glanced up. Just a few feet above her head, the sitting room window had been opened to let in the balmy June air. Resisting every instinct that screamed for her to flee, she listened to the conversation. Her ears strained to catch the sound of Drake's voice.



For some time Neville Strickland had harbored the feeling that he was caught in the cogs of an enormous machine. He had set the mighty engine in motion. Now it was smoking and churning out of his control, and he could neither stop it nor free himself from its pull. Now his gathering apprehension rose to a head at the sight of an unkempt and agitated Dalrymple in Phyllida's sitting room.

Dalrymple's presence appeared to unnerve Phyllida every bit as much. "How dare you show yourself here? That Bow Street Runner of Drake's passed through town just a few days ago on his way north. He came around asking more questions. What if one of the servants recognizes you?"

"Gag her with something will you, Strickland?" Dalrymple honed in on the brandy decanter like a trained falcon swooping down on a hare. Disdaining the thimble-size glasses, he tipped the whole decanter back and all but drained it.

Flinching under Phyllida's glare of outrage, Neville addressed their *guest*. "I say, old fellow, you are the last person we expected to see. Thought you were off trysting under the Mediterranean sun."

He was lying.

For some time Neville had suspected that the man he'd hired was not who he claimed to be. The look of contempt Dalrymple cast him in reply made Neville wonder if he had suddenly sprouted the head of an ass.

"Did you honestly suppose I could get to Florence, let alone live

in any kind of style on the pittance you gave me? I have been hibernating in a little hidey-hole of mine out past Ealing. Has that cousin of yours got his divorce yet? I've seen nothing about it in the papers, when I've been able to come by them. What is he dragging his feet over?"

Neville's sense of alarm escalated tenfold. "Drake claims he doesn't want a divorce. He's reluctant to air a scandal. What does that matter to you?"

"And what are you doing here?" added Phyllida, her mouth puckered like a prune.

"The lovely Lady Silverthorne has escaped my custody," announced Dalrymple, his mannerly words laced with a bitter dose of sarcasm.

"Escaped?" squeaked Neville. "You mean she didn't go away with you of her own accord?"

"She might have done if I'd been patient, but when she pretended reluctance I knocked her on the head and dragged her off. All the while making it look like we were bound for Italy. Clever, no?"

As one, Neville and Phyllida collapsed onto the settee.

Fetching him a furious blow, she burst into hysterical tears. "We're ruined! Doomed! This is all your fault, Neville. I never should have listened to you. She will run straight to Drake, and then... ooo! I daren't think what he'll do to us!" She ended in a doleful wail.

Dalrymple swooped down and gripped her by the arm. "Button up you wet goose, or I'll give you something to bawl about. The last place she's likely to run is back to Silverthorne. I told her he was the one who hired me to dispose of her. Fortunately, she's almost as gullible as the pair of you. Now we've got to get her back before she draws any unpleasant attention to us."

Her face pale as a sheet, Phyllida wrenched her arm from Dalrymple's grasp. "To you, you mean. We didn't pay you kidnap the woman, just persuade her to run off with you."

Dalrymple brought his handsome face within inches of hers. His reply was almost too quiet to hear, yet it carried a lethal edge. "Depend upon it, Lady Phyllida. If I go before a judge, you and your dear cousin here will be standing on either side of me. Swinging there too if it comes to that."

He straightened up, assuming his accustomed air of cynical composure. "We must get her back and you are going to help me.

Otherwise I swear I'll skip the country, leaving Lord Silverthorne a very convincing message incriminating the pair of you."

Neville felt his head bobbing furiously up and down in agreement. "What must we do?"

"Place a notice in all the papers. Say we're looking for a poor mad woman who has run away from her loving family. Say she must be found before she comes to harm. Offer a reward for information."

"Very well." At that moment Neville would have given up all his expectations simply to turn the calendar back before any of this started. From his lackluster schooling he dredged up the old story of Pandora and her box.



In a daze, Lucy stumbled away from Grafton Square, scarcely conscious of where her legs were carrying her. The conversation between Neville, Phyllida and Dalrymple echoed in her thoughts. Her heart raced and her empty stomach curdled, knowing they were on her trail like a pack of bloodhounds. All the same, a curious lightness buoyed her step, for Drake had *not* been the one behind her abduction, after all.

She did not deserve him. Through her impulsive folly, he had once again been exposed to public ridicule as a man no woman would suffer. In spite of everything she knew about her husband's honorable character, she had swallowed Dalrymple's lies, believed him capable of the treachery committed against her. He was better off without such a wife.

But if not to Drake, where could she turn?

Suddenly Lucy became aware of her surroundings again. Lost in thought, she had wandered into Covent Garden. If only she'd been sensible enough to walk here on that fateful day in March, instead of rashly appealing to Dalrymple for a drive...

With that thought came the recollection of Mrs. Beaumont. Obviously, she had no part in Dalrymple's plot after all. However, she did know something Drake wanted kept from his wife. Perhaps that was all the influence Lucy would need to prevail upon her for help.

Inquiring at the theater for Mrs. Beaumont's address, Lucy received directions to a side street nearby.

"She don't see callers as a rule these days," the charlady informed Lucy. "Retired from the stage she has and planning to leave the city, I hear. Pity that. Her so pretty and popular with the crowds."

Without a coin to tip, Lucy offered the woman her warmest smile of thanks. By the time she reached Mrs. Beaumont's house, she was footsore and weary to the bone. So the actress was planning a retirement to the country. The Lake Country, perhaps? Just because Drake was innocent of engineering her kidnapping, did not mean he hadn't taken advantage of her absence. Still, if she promised to stay away, Mrs. Beaumont might at least advance her the coach fare to Bath.

As she knocked on the actress's door, Lucy tried to come up with a plausible story to gain admission.

Before she could open her mouth to speak however, a stern-looking housekeeper eyed her up and down and motioned her inside. "This way. Come along."

Swallowing her astonishment, Lucy followed down a long dark hall and up a narrow staircase. Stopping before a closed door, the housekeeper knocked softly then held it open for Lucy to enter.

As she stepped over the threshold, the door closed almost soundlessly behind her.

Dainty, cream-colored draperies filtered the warm June sunlight, giving the room a luminous aura. The same tranquil glow exuded from the woman who hovered over a tiny cradle. In a dressing gown the hue of Lake Country daffodils, she looked like the Madonna as Gainsborough or Lawrence might paint her.

Lucy stood transfixed, caught in a maelstrom of conflicting emotions.

Mrs. Beaumont looked up at her and smiled. "You must be here about the wet nurse position."

She spoke in a low voice so as not to disturb the sleeping infant. "I believe you'll suit admirably once we get you cleaned up a bit. How soon is your baby due?"

Chapter Twenty-two

I’M DUE... s-soon,” Lucy stammered. “May I sit down? I’ve walked a long way today, and I’m feeling rather faint.”

“Why of course, my dear.” Mrs. Beaumont ushered her to a comfortably upholstered chair near the baby’s cradle. “How thoughtless of me. You don’t look as if you’ve eaten properly in a while either. Shall I ring for Janet to bring you a biscuit and some tea?”

“Later perhaps.” Lucy could not keep herself from returning the other woman’s smile. It spoke volumes for Mrs. Beaumont’s character, this concern for the well-being of a virtual stranger. Here was a woman worthy of Drake.

“I hope you won’t object to answering a few questions about your background,” said Mrs. Beaumont.

Lucy shook her head. Her conscience pricked her for misleading such a kind lady. However, it might be the only way to discover if this child was the secret Drake had wished to keep from her.

“It won’t pose a problem for you, removing to the country?” The actress looked visibly ill at ease with this necessary avenue of inquiry. “You have no strong ties to hold you in London? Friends? Family? ... A husband?”

“I’m a widow,” Lucy replied wondering if a trained actress would recognize a blatant falsehood when she heard it. “I have no friends or family of any kind, which is why this post would be a godsend.”

“You poor dear.” Mrs. Beaumont clasped Lucy’s fingers. “What a desperate situation for any woman particularly with a child on the way. I am recently widowed as well. Fortunately my child has been provided for.”

That soothed Lucy’s conscience somewhat. At least she was not the only liar of the two. Did this mean Drake had abandoned his mistress and child, leaving only hard cash to represent him? She scarcely knew whether to feel pleased or disillusioned. She detected a moist gleam in Rosalind Beaumont’s eyes.

“I’m very sorry about your husband,” Lucy murmured.

As she was about to inquire what had become of the lady’s fictitious husband, the baby gave a thin squall, like the mewing of a cat. Mrs. Beaumont reached out and gently began to rock the

cradle. Lucy's gaze fixed on the child. Its head of fine dark hair and the thick, black eyebrows looked oddly out of place on an infant.

Before she had time to think, the words were out of her mouth. "He does look like his father."

"I beg your pardon?"

Lucy caught herself. "I mean, *does* he look like his father at all?"

"No," Mrs. Beaumont whispered. She gazed intently at the baby, now peacefully asleep once more. A faint sound escaped her lips, a chuckle with the slight catch of an arrested sob. "He takes after me entirely in his looks. Though they say baby's first hair is often dark then the second comes in lighter. If that happens, he still may be a handsome golden-head to remind me of..."

A tear escaped her eye and slid slowly down her cheek.

Lucy's breath caught in her throat and her own eyes suddenly brimmed with unshed tears. One last question and she would know the truth she suspected. "Will you call him Jeremy?"

Perhaps Rosalind Beaumont was too deeply immersed in a melancholy mingling of love for her child and renewed grief for his father. Whatever the reason, she gave no sign that she recognized the significance of Lucy's question.

In a dreamy, faraway voice she replied quietly, "No. I would not presume. Lord Silverthorne has been generous enough, allowing us to use..."

Her reverie shattered into shards of bewilderment and alarm. "Why did you ask that? How do you know? Who are you?"

Covering her face with her hands, Lucy wept in soft shuddering sobs. She knew she should be shedding tears of anguish for this final betrayal of Jeremy's, this proof that she had meant nothing to him beyond a passing conquest. In truth, those feelings might have accounted for a drop or two. But they were lost in an ocean of joyous brine, a wave of buoyant relief that Drake was the gentleman of honor she had long believed him to be.

Perhaps their wondrous night of love, the one she had tried in vain to forget, had meant as much to him as it had to her.

Gradually, she regained her composure. "Forgive my deception, Mrs. Beaumont, but I had to find out about the paternity of your son. I promise no harm will come to either of you by my knowing the truth. My name is Lucy Strickland. Lord Silverthorne is my husband."

Mrs. Beaumont's pretty mouth fell open. She stared at Lucy as if

speculating whether she had welcomed a mad woman into her home.

“Lady Silverthorne? But, how? I thought... I mean, it was being said that you’d... gone away... with a man.” She passed Lucy a handkerchief.

Mopping up the last of her tears, Lucy gave a bitter chuckle. “For *gone away* substitute *made away with* and you will be nearer the truth.”

“Made away with? You mean... abducted?”

Lucy nodded.

“Against your will?”

“If I’d cooperated it would hardly be abduction, would it?” Lucy ran a hand through her hair and came up with several short switches of straw. “I managed to escape yesterday and rode to town in a hay wain. I came to you because I hoped you might help me. I have no money, nowhere to hide and the man who kidnapped me is on my trail.”

As Lucy related the events of her abduction, imprisonment and eventual escape, Mrs. Beaumont’s eyes widened and her breath quickened. When the story concluded, she fairly burst out, “Of course you must stay here. I will do all I can to help you. Come now. Let us get you a proper meal then a bath and fresh clothes.”

Suddenly Lucy felt famished, disheveled and exhausted.

“Thank you,” she breathed. “You are very kind.”

“It is the least I can do to repay your husband’s generosity to me. I must say, I never did understand his insistence on keeping this all a secret from you.”

The implied question struck Lucy dumb for a moment. Clearly, Mrs. Beaumont suspected nothing of her relationship with Jeremy. That was precisely the way Lucy intended to keep it.

“You probably realize my husband is a very scrupulous man. My father is the local vicar. Perhaps his lordship thought I might take some moral offence. I assure you, I am the last person qualified to sit in judgement.”



Drake checked his saddlebags one last time. The Spaniard tossed his black mane and whinnied, as if anxious to be on the road, tearing up the miles between Nicholthwait and London. The horse was not

one whit more anxious than his master. Drake had rushed through all the arrangements required for his absence, uncertain how long it might be.

Logically, he knew a day or two's delay would make no difference at this stage. In rational moments he conceded there was nothing he could do to find Lucy that his agent could not accomplish with greater ease and skill. Common sense decreed that Lucy might not be within a hundred miles of London in any case.

None of that mattered. London was the last place he had seen her. He blamed himself for believing the worst of her. He had allowed precious time to elapse before beginning a serious investigation into her disappearance. Her time was near, and he could not live with the thought that she might give birth far away from him, frightened and perhaps in terrible jeopardy.

Hearing a hubbub outside the stables, he led the Spaniard over to see what was causing all the fuss. A boy broke from his animated exchange with the butler when he saw Drake coming. The boy thrust a paper into his hand.

"From the magistrate in Carlyle, milord. They've taken that fellow Crook who blew up your mine."

Drake scanned the letter impatiently. The authorities had apprehended Janus Crook, the swindling overseer from High Head, as he'd tried to escape the country. The magistrate needed Drake to come north at once to swear out a warrant against the miscreant.

"Why now?" he muttered to himself, crushing the paper in his fist. "That damned rascal's been at large for half a year and now they take him."

Remembering the messenger, he fumbled in his pocket and tossed the boy a small handful of silver. The lad bobbed his head and departed, grinning from ear to ear.

"How will this affect your travelling plans, milord?" asked Talbot.

Drake sighed. "I have little choice in the matter. I must go to Carlyle. The minute I've dispatched my business with Mr. Janus Crook, I shall head south again. I don't fancy an extra two days added to my journey, but..."

He shrugged. Sometimes he wondered if the Fates were conspiring against him.

"Safe journey, sir." Talbot held Drake's hat while he mounted the Spaniard. "Any idea when we may see you back at Silverthorne?"

Drake stared down at the man suddenly aware of the deep

concern imprinted on those normally impassive features. "I may stop here again on my way south. After that, I'll return when I can bring my wife home, though I have no idea when that may be."

"Soon, I hope, milord."

"Yes." Drake gave the Spaniard a subtle nudge to go. "The sooner the better."



"There it is." Lucy scanned the paid notices in the newspaper, ignoring the front page headline which proclaimed the assassination of Prime Minister Perceval on the previous day. "*Lady Sought*. It's all there—a description of me, that I am with child and near my time. Not to mention all that balderdash Dalrymple concocted about my being in a *state of extreme nervous distress*. I'd like to lock him up for three months and see how well his nerves stand it!"

Rosalind Beaumont glanced up from nursing her baby. She had not much cared for the looks of the other women who'd inquired after the position of wet-nurse. At Lucy's urging, she had decided to take the unfashionable step of nourishing the child herself. "What else does the notice say?"

Lucy read on. "It directs inquiries to a Mr. Clarke at the Piazza Coffeehouse. Oh, dear! That's just around the corner. And they're offering a reward of fifty pounds for information leading to my *recovery*."

"Fifty pounds?" Mrs. Beaumont blanched. For many in London that sum represented a vast, scarcely conceivable fortune. "Do you think anyone might have seen you come here?"

"I don't doubt it. The Market was teeming as usual, and I asked directions of that charwoman at the theater. I must leave at once. You have been so very kind to me. I would not place you and the baby in danger on any account. Dalrymple is a desperate man."

"Do not worry." The actress held her son to her shoulder, rubbing his tiny back. "We can hide you here at least until Lord Silverthorne comes."

Lucy's head snapped up. The newspaper wafted out of her slack fingers. "Drake is coming? But... how...?"

"The very day you arrived, I sent Janet to find a fast post rider who would carry a message north."

Lucy heaved herself from the chair. In the past week, her girth

had increased dramatically. "This is terrible news! I cannot face him. Not now. I do not begin to deserve a man like him after exposing him to scandal and ridicule with my heedless behavior. Even if he would take me back out of some misplaced sense of duty, he is better off without me."

"I don't believe that for a moment." Mrs. Beaumont tucked the sleeping infant back into his cradle. "And I doubt your husband does either. You must stay."

"I must go." Lucy took the other woman's hand. "But you have done me a service. I had intended going to my aunt in Bath. If Drake is on his way to London, then I am free to return home to my father in Nicholthwait."

Mrs. Beaumont squeezed Lucy's hand. "I will gladly provide you with coach fare, of course. But how can we spirit you out of town practically under the nose of that blackguard, Dalrymple?"

Lucy nodded ruefully. "With fifty pounds at stake, people will be quizzing any expectant mother who ventures abroad."

"True." A cunning smile lit Mrs. Beaumont's face. "Though I doubt anyone will look twice at a fat old crone in mourning."

"I fail to see how that will do *me* any good."

"You forget, Lady Silverthorne. I am an actress."

Before Lucy could ask what bearing that had on the situation, Rosalind Beaumont added, "A mistress of disguise."

"Ahh!" Lucy caught her new friend's infectious smile. "A mistress of disguise."

Early the next morning, the Royal Mail coach set off from London for Manchester and points north. It carried a plump woman in deep mourning weeds, her bonnet swathed in a heavy black veil.

Lucy watched the outskirts of London melt away, her relief growing with every mile the fast mail coach put between itself and the city. She counted herself fortunate that the only other inside passenger was an uncommunicative older man, thoroughly absorbed in his book. This would not be a leisurely progress like she and Drake had enjoyed on their trip to London. The mail coach kept a strict timetable and prided itself on speed. They would be fortunate to get two brief stops for refreshment on a continuous journey of nearly a day-and-a-half.

As that June day wore on, Lucy felt increasingly stifled in the greatcoat that concealed her condition and the heavily veiled bonnet that further disguised her identity. Mrs. Beaumont had even

thought to pad her black gloves with cotton, so her slender fingers did not betray the masquerade. When evening fell and the mail coach raced along the deserted roads of the Midlands, Lucy shifted in her seat continuously. It was almost impossible to find a position sufficiently comfortable that she could snatch an hour's rest.

Her thoughts offered her no comfort either. Hour after hour without the slightest diversion, she mulled over the events of the past months. What a fool she had been. Fate had put her in the way of a fine man like Drake Strickland and she had disdained him. Instead, she'd clung to the memory of a thoughtless, selfish boy not worth a tenth of his brother's measure. At every turn she'd valued fair appearances instead of true merit, putting style before substance. Too late she'd learned the bitter lesson *all that glitters is not gold*.

It had eased her brooding heart to discover Drake was not the father of Rosalind Beaumont's infant son. That she could have entertained such a suspicion proved yet again how unworthy she was of him. His insistence on hiding the child's existence from her also boded ill. If he'd wanted her for himself, shouldn't he have been eager to expose Jeremy's betrayal to shake her from her naive infatuation with an idealized memory?

How glad she would be to see her father again, to convince him she was well, and innocent of any wrongdoing. As soon as she could possibly travel with her child, however, she would have to quit Nicholthwait for good. No sense trying to fool herself that she and Drake had a future together.

As the morning sun rose on the second day and the mail coach rolled north from Manchester, Lucy set her teeth and tried to ignore her first twinges of labor.

Chapter Twenty-three

“**W**HAT’S ALL THE row? Who’s there?” Silverthorne’s butler demanded sharply, holding a tall wax candle to light the dark corners of the larder.

“I am your culprit, Mr. Talbot.” Grinning ruefully, Drake held his hands above his head until the butler recognized him. He wouldn’t have put it past Talbot to be carrying a loaded blunderbuss.

“Milord!” Expelling a gasp of relief, the butler shuffled forward in his dressing gown. “Why did you not ring the bell?”

“Who is it, Mr. Talbot? Have you caught a prowler?” Mrs. Maberley called from beyond the kitchen door.

“Sorry to wake the house,” said Drake. “Considering the hour, I thought I could forage a bite on my own.”

Near midnight he’d ridden into the forecourt at Silverthorne, weary, hungry and desperately anxious to be on his way to London. He had pressed on from Carlyle several hours after he was ready to fall from his saddle. What was the sense of supping and trying to rest at some indifferent inn? A few miles more and he could enjoy the food from his own good larder and sleep in his own clean bed.

“Light the fire for us, Mr. Talbot, like a good fellow.” The cook bustled about, sweeping up the remains of a crockery bowl, now smashed into a thousand pieces by Drake fumbling about in the dark. “How did it go in Carlyle, milord?”

“As well as can be expected, I suppose.” Too hungry to wait for a proper meal, Drake filched a bun and devoured it in two wolfish bites. “Janus Crook has been caught. He’ll be in the custody of the Carlyle authorities until he stands trial. My solicitor is taking steps to regain what we can from the funds Crook embezzled. I mean to use part of it to compensate the people of High Head. Build a school, perhaps.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say how much Lucy would like the idea. He checked the impulse. Instead he asked, “Any word from London?”

“From London?” said Talbot “Why no, milord. Were you expecting a message?”

Drake shook his head. Not expecting. Hoping, though. Hoping Langstroth had somehow tracked Lucy down in spite of the stone-

cold trail he had to follow.

"If you ask me," Mrs. Maberley placed before him a plate of bread, cold meat and cold pie, "you ought to get a decent night's rest and a few good meals before you head off to London. Galloping from one end of the country to the other at a moment's notice, you'll wear yourself out and make yourself ill."

"No, Mrs. Maberley." Drake shook his head at her kindly-meant suggestion. "I appreciate your concern, but I must be off again at first light. If I stay, I will only fret myself into a worse state."

How could he stay here at Silverthorne when he could be on the road to London? Ever since his interview with Langstroth, Lucy had preoccupied his thoughts more than ever. What had become of her? Would he ever see her again?



It was well past noon when Drake finally stirred. Picking up the mantel clock, he held it to his ear, to check if it was running. Hearing the muted *tick-tick-tick* and realizing it must be showing the correct time, he dashed the timepiece onto the bricks of the hearth, growling a long string of profanities. Striding into his dressing room, he threw open the wardrobe doors, thrusting various parts of his body into more or less appropriate articles of clothing. The litany of curses continued unabated.

"What is the meaning of this?" he barked at the butler as he flew down the stairs two at a time. "I left instructions to be woken at dawn."

From his post in the entry Talbot glanced up, imperturbable as ever. "I beg your pardon, milord. I recall you saying you meant to ride out early, but I did not realize you intended anyone should wake you. I thought you'd decided to catch up on your sleep before undertaking that long journey south."

Being caught with no one to blame did not sweeten Drake's temper. "I've lost the better part of a day now. I must try to make up the time. Have the grooms saddle the Spaniard."

"Surely, sir, you'll have a hot meal before you go."

"Dash it all man, can't you understand? I've lost more time than I can afford as it is."

"Before you go, sir." Talbot drew a slender envelope from his breast pocket. "This just arrived from London."

Drake snatched the paper, broke the unfamiliar seal and tore the letter open. Expecting a communication from Langstroth, he stared in bewilderment at scarcely a dozen words penned in a woman's delicate hand.

"Your wife has escaped and is in hiding with me. Come at once. R. Beaumont."

Over and over he read the words until two of them at least began to make sense to him—*wife* and *escaped*.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

"Talbot! Thank God!" Throwing his arms around the butler, Drake lifted him clear of the floor, spinning several times around.

Setting Talbot down at last, he thrust the letter at his reeling servant and sprinting for the door. "I'll saddle the Spaniard myself."



The Royal Mail coach pulled into Nicholthwait's *Three Tuns Inn*, at four o'clock precisely, for a change of horses and driver scheduled to take no more than five minutes. Teeth clenched against her increasing pain, Lucy climbed down. Though she swayed slightly at the feel of solid ground beneath her feet, she could scarcely contain her joy at coming home.

Saint Mawe's and the vicarage were not far from the inn, no more than half a mile. However, as the force of her next contraction bent Lucy almost double, she wondered how she would make it even that short distance. When the pain finally passed, she stripped off her gloves, bonnet and greatcoat. The clement June breeze and the sweet scents of a Lake Country spring embraced her, welcoming her home at long last.

Home. As much as she yearned for her father and the vicarage where she'd grown up, part of her felt the pull of Silverthorne. Ridiculous, cold reason protested. She'd lived there only a few months. It was not as though she had conceived her child there or Viscount Silverthorne had fathered him. On the long coach ride from London, Lucy had often caught herself daydreaming along those lines. She'd imagined how it might have been, if she'd never succumbed to Jeremy Strickland's suave blandishments. Her wedding night with Drake might have matched their blissful tryst following Lady Henley's ball.

The gathering power of another birth pang roused Lucy from her

reverie. She shook her head to clear it of such wishful foolishness. Lord Silverthorne would never have spared her a second glance, let alone wed her, if he had not desperately needed an heir and she had not been carrying his dead brother's child.

"Oh." She gasped as the mounting pain clutched her abdomen like a giant invisible hand and squeezed. She simply could not go another step. The next wave of pain would surely push her fainting into the wayside to bear her young like some poor stray animal.

When the pain receded at last and Lucy opened her tightly clenched eyes, she saw a carriage halted before her, its door held open invitingly. It looked like the phaeton belonging to Squire Lowes. Perhaps he had recognized her even after the months of her absence. More likely, he had assumed her to be a stranger in distress. Lucy thanked heaven for Lake Country hospitality. His carriage would bear her to the vicarage in a trice.

Eagerly she tottered toward the waiting phaeton, determined to get inside and explain where she was bound, before the next labor spasm overtook her.

"How kind of you, Squire." She climbed aboard with the assistance of a gloved hand held out to her. "I cannot thank you enough. I'm not going far, just—"

The carriage door swung shut behind her with a sharp, irrevocable *clack*. In the darkened interior of the coach, Lucy squinted to make out the face of her benefactor. The carriage lurched off at a greater speed than necessary to cover the brief distance to the vicarage.

"You have led me a merry chase, Lady Silverthorne." Eugene Dalrymple's face came into focus. In contrast to his mannered words, his tone was coldly menacing. "I believe the last time you saw me we were driving in a carriage. What do the French call that —*déjà vu*?"

He chuckled, as though making polite small talk at Almack's but his narrowed eyes glinted with frightening intensity.

Another wave of pain engulfed Lucy. She pressed herself back into the seat, a soft moan escaping her lips. As the contraction gripped her, she heard Dalrymple cluck his tongue.

"You have used up that dodge already, remember? At least do me the courtesy of coming up with something novel. Frankly, I would suggest a wiser course of unconditional cooperation."

A ray of afternoon sunlight pierced the grimy carriage window,

gleaming on a lethal-looking knife he held. "Since your husband appears unwilling to be rid of you, I shall make him pay dearly to get you back."

The pain eased, leaving Lucy limp and bone weary. What was the use of struggling? She had schemed and fled, eluded him, hidden, disguised herself and fled farther away. In the end she had fallen right back into his loathsome clutches. Now she was too tired to run and too weak to fight.

For herself.

Some spark of rebellion flickered to life in Lucy's heart. Never would she let her child come into the power of this smarmy blackguard. As that conviction surged within her, she spotted a familiar black horse galloping toward them carrying a familiar dark rider. In a single desperate burst, Lucy threw her greatcoat over Dalrymple's head. Diving for the carriage door, she screamed Drake's name at the top of her lungs.



Neville Strickland also recognized the dark horseman bearing down on them. Though sweating like the proverbial pig, he hunched deeper into the bulky greatcoat of his coachman's disguise. Pulling the dust scarf up just below his eyes, he felt in imminent danger of retching from fear and overwrought nerves.

Silently he cursed Phyllida. It had been her suggestion that Lucy might return to her father in Nicholthwait, despite her mistaken belief that Drake had ordered her abduction. The fact that Phyllida had guessed correctly did nothing to soften Neville's spite.

He'd been in this whole mess up to his neck anyhow, with Lucy at large and Dalrymple maniacally resolved to recapture her. Now Neville was in over his head, with a riptide sucking him down to hell.

He had the sinking suspicion Dalrymple meant to betray him by letting Drake ransom his wife. Yet, he dared not cross the fellow, considering the incriminating secret Dalrymple was holding over his head. What in heaven's name had possessed him to recruit such a ruthless cardsharp in the first place? One who made his living bilking weak, greedy, stupid noblemen out of their inheritances. Neville cursed himself for a weak, greedy, stupid...

"Drake!" Lucy's scream pierced even the thunderous tattoo of the

horses' pounding hooves. It startled Neville almost out of his greatcoat. Common sense insisted he should whip the horses on to greater speed. Instead, some long-buried instinct made him pull the reins tight, checking the team's headlong rush.

Drake must have heard the cry too, for his black stallion wheeled and made straight for the carriage horses, stopping them cold. The hired hacks tossed their manes and broke into a chorus of high, nervous whinnies. Neville could guess how they must feel. The sight of his towering dark cousin vaulting from the saddle filled him with the same elemental terror. Scrambling down from his perch, Neville could think of nothing beyond putting the greatest possible distance between himself and the whole benighted enterprise.

He got as far as the concealment of the hedgerow before curiosity lured him to glance back. He saw his cousin wrench open the door of the phaeton and reach inside. Instantly Drake flew backward, propelled by a black-booted foot on his chest. Obviously winded, he struggled to rise from the dust. Before he could gain his feet, Dalrymple came sailing out expelled by some unseen force. He landed squarely on top of Drake, knocking him back to the ground.

Neville could see Lucy watching helplessly from the open door of the carriage. Eyes wide with fear in a face pale and twisted with pain, she held one hand protectively over her bulging belly.

The men grappled on the ground for a moment. Light, agile Dalrymple regained his feet first. The afternoon sun glinted off a slender blade which suddenly appeared in his hand.

Damn! What if Dalrymple should kill Drake outright, here and now? Neville did not want to be Lord Silverthorne, with all those tiresome tenants and workers to consider. All he'd ever wanted was his expectations. Gingerly picking up a fist-size rock from the ground at his feet, he moved tentatively toward the combatants.

With the speed of a striking viper, Dalrymple slashed at his opponent. Drake raised an arm to protect his neck. Drops of bright blood spattered the dust. In a blind rage, Drake lashed out. Dalrymple danced beyond his reach then skipped in again to inflict another quick slice. An anguished wail from Lucy made all three men pause for a heartbeat and turn toward her.

Dalrymple recovered first. With Drake's attention momentarily diverted, he took his chance and lunged in for a deadly strike. Gritting his teeth and squinting in distaste, Neville raised his rock. With all the force he could muster, he brought it down on the back

of Dalrymple's blond head. Dalrymple staggered and his aim went wide.

With a guttural bellow of rage, Drake dashed the blade aside and sent Dalrymple flailing onto the ground. Leaping upon his foe, he straddled the smaller man's chest and began to punish his pretty face with blow after blow. Each one made Neville wince just to watch.



"Drake, the baby!" Lucy's tormented cry woke Drake from his blood lust.

Not bothering to check if his enemy was dead or alive, he leapt from the ground and raced to her side, oblivious to the blood still seeping from his wounds.

"You!" Drake barked. He pointed toward the coachman's perch on the phaeton. "Get back up there and drive! Follow this road until you see a big house on a hill. Make for that."

Catching Lucy in his arms, he drew her back into the carriage.

Moments later the phaeton surged forward up the narrow road, past the old stone church toward Silverthorne.

"Lucy, what are you doing here? I thought you were in London." Drake held her in his arms the way he'd cradled her on that long-ago night when he'd proposed. He wanted desperately to kiss her but he did not dare. Some half-mad instinct told him this might be an illusion. If so, he did not want to risk shattering it.

"What are *you* doing here?" Lucy gasped. "Didn't you get Mrs. Beaumont's... message? I never would have... come if I'd known you were still—"

Another birth pang robbed her of speech.

Her words wounded Drake far more deeply than Dalrymple's toy of a knife. She would never have come to Nicholthwait if she'd known he was still here. When would he learn to stop hoping?

If she'd been with Rosalind Beaumont, Lucy must have learned the truth about Jeremy. For as long as Drake had known her, she'd been an idealist and a romantic. Had the knowledge of Jeremy's betrayal poisoned her capacity for trust and love?

Chapter Twenty-four

AN HOUR LATER, Drake descended the main staircase at Silverthorne, his usual brisk stride subdued to a hesitant, rather unsteady walk. They had settled Lucy into her own bed, the household scrambling to prepare for the birth of her child. After what she had said to him in the carriage, he'd expected she would not want him near her.

To his surprise, she'd clung to his hand until the doctor arrived and made him leave. Suddenly conscious of the two knife wounds Dalrymple had inflicted, he let Talbot clean and bind them. Then he changed out of his blood-soaked clothes.

Urgently trying to distract himself from what was happening in the room upstairs, Drake latched on to the village constable when the man appeared.

"Have you got Dalrymple in custody? I want to press charges for kidnapping, assault and attempted murder."

The constable scratched his chin. "We have him, your lordship, but he'll not be standing trial."

"Not standing trial?" Drake flared. "That's impossible! The blackguard abducted my wife, not once but *twice*... came after me with a—"

"You mistake me, Lord Silverthorne." The constable raised his hand to halt Drake's voluble indignation. "Dalrymple may not face a judge in this world, but he'll have to answer to a higher court."

"I killed him?" Drake blanched. "It was purely in self-defense, I assure you. If you'd care to question Dalrymple's driver, I had him detained. I don't believe he took part in Dalrymple's crimes. In fact I owe the man my life. He came to my assistance when Dalrymple attacked me with a knife."

"Rest assured, your lordship, I will want to question the fellow. As for killing Dalrymple, don't trouble your conscience. He was battered but alive when you drove away. I've a witness who saw that scoundrel make the mistake of trying to escape on that bad-tempered black stallion of yours."

Drake scarcely needed to hear the constable's next words. In all the commotion, he hadn't spared a thought for the Spaniard.

"The beast threw him," the constable confirmed what Drake already suspected. "Snapped his neck like a twig."

That came as no surprise, either.

Drake nodded. The world was well clear of a dangerous criminal. His overwhelming feeling was a sense of relief. He had no blood on his hands and no murder charge hanging over his head.

"If you'll allow me to speak to the driver, constable," he said at last. "Then I'll turn him over to you for questioning."

"Very good your lordship. No hurry about it. I understand you've got your hands full just now."

As if on cue, one of the housemaids came rushing down the stairs. "Milord, the doctor says come at once! The mistress is calling for you. She won't settle and the doctor says it's making the birth go all the harder."

Drake shot up the steps three at a time, his own injuries forgotten. He also forgot the constable until he was halfway up the stairs. Halting abruptly, he called down, "Dalrymple's driver is in the library. I don't know how long I may be. If you want to question him now, go ahead. I can offer him my thanks later."

"Thank you for your cooperation, Lord Silverthorne. I hope all goes well with your lady."

Drake bounded up the last of the stairs and down the hall. When he pulled open the door to Lucy's room, he heard her voice sharp with pain and raw with fear.

"Where is Lord Silverthorne? I must speak to him. Please. It's urgent."

A jumbled chorus of voices responded in various tones of entreaty, reassurance and appeasement. She must lie still. They had sent for Lord Silverthorne. He was on his way. She must not upset herself.

When he stepped into the room, they all turned toward him like flowers to the sun. He swept them with his most commanding stare and uttered a single word.

"Go."

Only Doctor Varoy offered even a show of reluctance to comply. "Don't stay too long, Drake. Calm her down then call me back. I'll be right outside if you need me."

When Drake gave no response but a continued steady look, the doctor backed toward the door. "Five minutes, Drake. I won't give you any longer. A birthing room is no place for a husband, especially a gentleman."

Drake rushed to the bed and knelt by Lucy. She paid him no mind

at first, lost in the strain of bearing her child. A whimper broke from her lips. Catching her hand in his, Drake twined their fingers together, wishing he could leech part of her pain with his touch. Perhaps he did—or perhaps the pang eased in the natural ebb and flow of nativity.

Lucy looked into his face with a bright wonder of recognition, as though her spirit had just then returned to her body from afar.

“Thank you for coming,” she breathed.

As if he would voluntarily stay away.

“I haven’t much time. I can’t talk when the pain takes me. I want you to know how sorry I am for the trouble I’ve brought on you. I was such a fool from start to finish. Never deserved the kindness you’ve shown me.”

Drake opened his mouth, but no words would come. Couldn’t she see it had nothing to do with kindness and nothing to do with deserving? He loved her with every nerve and sinew in his body. He would move heaven and earth for her, without ever once considering whether she deserved his service.

Love was not bestowed on the basis of merit. It took hold of the heart powerfully, sometimes painfully as the elemental force of birth took hold of a woman’s ripe body.

All of this Drake knew as he knew how to walk and how to breathe but he could not put it into words. Although his heart was full to bursting, his mind had suddenly emptied of all but the baldest, most prosaic phrases.

“You mustn’t say that. You’re home now and safe. That’s what matters.”

She shook her head, determined to be all the more severe with herself in spite of his clemency. “I’ve been a wet goose. For all my book learning, I knew nothing about life. Judging by appearances, never recognizing true value. You deserve better.”

More talk of deserving and value. Drake’s heart sank. She could not begin to reciprocate his feelings, or she would never use such words.

She gripped his hand harder. “I must make you understand. I never meant to go with Dalrymple.”

Drake sensed another spasm gathering power within her. “Of course you didn’t. I know what happened. I don’t blame you.”

“I *am* to blame. I overheard you and Mrs. Beaumont talking. Heard you tell her I mustn’t know her secret. I thought you and

she..."

"Mrs. Beaumont? You thought I...?" The very notion bewildered him completely.

Even if he'd known she overheard them, he never would have dreamed she'd jump to such a conclusion. An obvious one perhaps, in the case of any other man. To think Rosalind Beaumont would want him, though. To consider he would take a mistress when he longed day and night for his wife. Even hearing the suggestion from Lucy's lips, Drake could scarcely credit it.

He had no time for rebuttal. Gasping for air like a swimmer breasting the waves, Lucy gripped his hand. The force of it almost made him cry out. He watched the pain wring her, feeling more completely helpless than at any other time in his life. Only when her hold relaxed did he draw breath again.

For a moment she seemed to search for the thread of her previous words. "Don't be angry. Forgive me. Should have known you'd never stoop to... anything... dishonorable. I was so confused by my feelings then. Beginning to realize I loved you."

The very thought of it robbed him of all thought. He could only stare at her like a dumb animal.

She must have misunderstood his silence. "I know this isn't the time. It goes against the... promises we made. I don't ask you to return my feelings, just to hear me."

He yearned to reassure her that there could be no *bad time* to receive such news. The very fact of receiving it, even on the brink of doom, transformed this to a wondrous time. But the words would not come.

Tears welled in her eyes, and Drake wished he could drown himself in them.

"I love you, Drake. Some wise part of me... always has. The foolish part... tricked me into believing... I cared for Jeremy." She shook her head. "I never *knew* your brother. Just wrapped him in an ideal... from my books and daydreams. I know you, Drake. You're no... romantic paragon, but you are... ten times the man your brother was. Wish I'd realized that sooner, for both our sakes."

He longed to tell her that she had just transformed his world. That in a single stroke she'd made him more nearly whole than at any time in his life. He found himself scarcely capable of framing the thought, let alone the words.

Her grip on his hand tightened again. "One last thing... must ask

you.”

The intensity of her gaze wrenched the promise from him. “Anything.”

“Something’s wrong... with me. With the birth. I see it when Dr. Varoy... looks at me. Promise me, Drake... you won’t let them harm my baby.”

“Harm the baby? Of course not. Everything will be well. You’ll see.”

“Swear it?”

“Of course, I swear. I’d never let anyone harm our child.”

Her fierce concentration bled away quietly. “Thank you. I’m content to die Just wish it didn’t... hurt so much.”

“You’re not going to die, Lucy. You can’t.”

She chuckled softly, her eyes glowing with all the love she’d confessed for him and more. “Not something you can forbid... my lord. Better this way. I know it. Such disgrace on your good name... never live it down. Couldn’t be content in our marriage... feeling as I do.”

He tried to interrupt her then. He wanted to ask why in the world she could not be content when she loved him and he adored her. She persisted, perhaps sensing she did not have much time before the next wave of labor hit.

“I know you’ll cherish this child... give him the love you missed.”

“Yes I will, but please don’t talk like this, Lucy, as if you won’t be here to help me.”

“Don’t spoil him... like Jeremy. Want my son to grow up a fine man... like you. Worthy successor... to... his... father.”

He started to protest again, when another contraction racked her. Feeling a firm hand on his shoulder, he spun around to see Charles Varoy. Lucy was right. His old friend’s face betrayed more than usual concern.

With a sideways nod of his unkempt head, the doctor motioned toward the door. “Get away with you now, like a good fellow. Your lady’s in capable hands.”

“Dash it, Charles, is there nothing I can do?”

The doctor’s voice dropped to a low whisper. “If I were you, I’d head down to the chapel. Put in an earnest word with a greater power.”

Drake’s eyes widened. “As bad as that?”

Glancing at Lucy, who was stirring in the ebb-troth of her labor,

Varoy gave only a curt nod in reply.

As Drake stalked from the room, he heard Lucy call after him. "Don't forget your promise, Drake. I'll hold you to it."

He did not turn around to answer her. He was suddenly possessed by a wild, superstitious certainty that if he did, it might be the last time he would see her alive.

Scarcely conscious of what he was doing or where he was going, he wandered down to the family chapel. It was all that survived of the original Silverthorne Manor, which had burned to the ground during the Restoration. There was not much to it beyond an altar and a couple of pews. The family no longer used it even for weddings or funerals. Inside, Drake found Vicar Rushton kneeling in prayer.

"My boy." The old clergyman beamed when Drake laid a hand on his shoulder. "I came as soon as I got word. I was visiting Mrs. Sowerby when your man finally tracked me down. She insisted on coming with me. I hope you don't mind. She's very fond of Lucy and she was a midwife before her sight failed. One of the maids took her up. Since Lucy's mother can't be with her..."

His voice trailed off, then he appeared to recall his original train of thought. "I paused here to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for my daughter's safe return to us. May I see her now? Or should I wait until... after?"

Drake clenched his features tight. His feelings too, for fear they might overwhelm him. In terse, almost brutal terms, he told his father-in-law how matters stood.

"Charles said I should pray," he concluded with an exhalation of bitter, ironic laughter. "You can tell a doctor hasn't much faith in his own powers when he acknowledges a higher one."

Though his face looked stricken, the vicar's voice remained warm and steady. "I expect our good doctor meant the prayers to help *you* through this, not Lucy. Come, kneel with me, then and we shall administer the doctor's prescription."

Drake dropped to his knees, as much out of exhaustion as anything. "I don't know where to begin, Vicar. I'm up at the lectern every Sunday reading the Scripture, but it's just a part of my duty. I'm not a godly man at all."

"Oh, my dear boy." The vicar's face blossomed in a smile of tender, paternal benevolence. "For as long as I've known you, you have lived your life for others. The well-fed faces of the children in

these parts, the decent homes families are able to keep, those are all testament to the workings of Our Lord in you.”

Though the affirmation warmed him, Drake shook his head. “What can I say? How dare I ask for special consideration from the Almighty? Other men lose wives and children in childbed—men in far greater need and far worthier than I.”

“It is not a question of worth, you see. Ask only for God’s will to prevail and for the strength you need to bear it.”

A deep, wrenching sigh shook Drake’s frame. “I don’t often surrender control, Vicar, but I’ll try.”

For several minutes, the two men prayed together in the receptive silence of the old chapel, communing with their deepest fears and dearest hopes. For no logical reason that he could fathom, Drake felt a strange sense of peace steal over him. At first he did not hear the muted footsteps approaching behind him. Then someone cleared his throat.

Drake turned. “Constable. What can I do for you?”

“Forgive the intrusion, milord. I’ve questioned Dalrymple’s driver and I think you ought to come see what you can make of him.”

“I’m rather... preoccupied at the moment, Constable. Can’t it wait?”

“Begging your pardon, sir. I don’t think it can.”



“Neville! What’s the meaning of this? Where’s Dalrymple’s driver?”

Neville’s knees knocked together so violently it was a wonder he could keep on his feet. He held up the greatcoat and scarf. “At your service, Cuz.”

Never had he seen his self-controlled cousin so greatly at a loss. Features slack and expressionless, Drake looked like someone had just clouted him in the face with a sack of horseshoes.

“But how? What connection do you have with Dalrymple?”

“Quite simple, really.” A vain attempt as his old sangfroid rang thin and hollow. “I hired him to seduce your wife and wreck your marriage.” Neville wasn’t certain what inconvenient flush of honor kept him from betraying Phyllida’s part in the whole sordid scheme.

Now Drake looked as though he’d taken that sack of horseshoes square on the kneecaps. The pain in his eyes unmanned Neville entirely.

"Why? What have I ever done to you?"

"Other than setting an insufferably sterling example and putting me continually in your debt, nothing."

"I don't understand."

"No. I don't expect you would understand greed and selfishness and blinkered stupidity on that scale." Neville hung his head. "You have every right to doubt me but please believe I never meant any harm to come to you or to Lucy."

"No harm? My God, Neville. You let him tear us apart." Drake held up his bandaged arms. "These are nothing compared to what I've been through in the past months. As for Lucy..."

"I expect you'll want to have me tried as an accomplice." Neville squared his shoulders, determined to take his downfall like a man. Inwardly, though, he trembled. Theft of goods above five shillings was punishable by hanging. The abduction of a peer's wife... did they still burn criminals at the stake?

Slowly, as if still dazed by these revelations Drake shook his head. "I don't believe you meant us any real harm, but you foolishly managed to get involved with a much more dangerous character. When it came to a choice at last, you saved my life. I'm sure that took more courage for you than for most men. You will have to pay for the havoc you've wrecked in our lives, Neville. But I don't see how it serves any good purpose for you to pay in blood."

"Thank you Drake." Neville sank to his knees. "You won't regret this, I swear. I'll do anything to make it up to you."

He might have completed his abasement then and there by bursting into grateful tears, but one of the maids intervened.

"Come quick, milord! The doctor and Mrs. Sowerby are fit to kill each other and the poor mistress is beside herself!"

Looking into his cousin's face, Neville saw written there all the harm his machinations had wrought. Suddenly the gallows seemed no excessive punishment for him.

Drake headed for the door. "Don't leave Silverthorne until I've had a chance to speak with the constable and decide what to do with you."

Neville nodded. "Is there anything I can do now?"

Drake spun around. The question appeared to surprise him, but pleasantly. "The only thing any of us can do now, Neville. Pray for my wife and child."

With those words, he dashed out behind the nearly hysterical

servant girl.

In the deafening silence of the library, Neville considered his cousin's request. True, he was already on his knees. But he hadn't said prayers since school and then only by rote.

What would it avail anyhow, the prayer of a repentant villain?

Chapter Twenty-five

POUNDING UP THE stairs, Drake heard the signs of strife before he saw them.

The doctor's voice rose, perturbed to a pitch of vexation such as Drake had never heard. "Damned if I'll let you back in there, you meddling old witch. You've got that poor girl worked up to a fit of hysterics on top of everything else."

"Now see here, you ham-handed sawbones!" Could that be placid old Widow Sowerby? "You're the one who got her in that state with your mutterings about killing her baby. You should learn to keep your voice down. A woman doesn't go deaf the minute she starts to give birth, you know."

"You're only making it worse, encouraging her to think there's any chance we can save them both."

Dr. Varoy's last words landed like a solid punch to Drake's stomach. As he strode up to the combatants they quieted for a moment, both gathering breath for a verbal assault on him most likely. In that instant of silence, Drake could make out Lucy's faint, hoarse cries emerging from behind the solid bedroom door.

"Don't let them hurt my baby. Please!"

His own impotent rage boiled up. Forgetting that Mrs. Sowerby could not see him, Drake glared murder at the pair of them.

"What are you doing out here, going at it hammer and tongs, when my wife needs you," he stabbed a forefinger at the door, "*in there*, cooperating to help bring her and the child safely through this?"

They both began to talk at once but the doctor's deep imperative tone drowned out Mrs. Sowerby. "That's the point, Drake, and it is cruel to let you believe otherwise. We have a choice to make and we must make it soon. It's either Lucy or the baby. The child is large for an eight-month baby."

For a split second, the offhand remark puzzled Drake. Then he realized the doctor was calculating from his wedding to Lucy.

"At least he has a big head," continued Dr. Varoy. "And your wife is a slender little thing, especially around the... hips." He stumbled over the indelicacy of the word, but professional necessity won out.

"If we want to save the child, I shall have to perform the

necessary surgery. There is not a moment to lose.”

“C-cut her?” Drake swayed on his feet.

Avoiding his eyes, the doctor nodded. “It is the only safe way to deliver the baby. I won’t lie to you, not many women survive the procedure.”

Drake did not need to be told that twice. His mother had died as a result of such a delivery.

“I cannot lose her, Charles. Not now.”

“Then we need to... compress the baby’s skull to get it out before she dies from the strain and blood loss.”

“Kill the child?”

The doctor raked a hand through his disheveled hair. “Isn’t that what I just said? I don’t care for the options any more than you do, but it’s not as though we have a choice. We must make a decision and act soon before we lose them both.”

“She made me swear not to let you harm the baby.” Drake clamped a fist to his mouth, suddenly realizing what that rash promise might cost him.

Dr. Varoy waved that objection away. “You cannot hold a woman responsible for the daft things she says in the extremity of childbirth, Drake. As her husband and the child’s father, this is a decision only you can make.”

All his life Drake had trained to make hard choices. He had prided himself on his ability to weigh all the factors and make a rational determination that would best serve his long-term interests. Never once had he shrunk from the necessity of decision making.

Until now.

Now he stood paralyzed, unable to face the consequences of either option Charles Varoy had presented to him. How could he sentence Lucy to death, even at her insistence? Never to see or hear her again. Never to bask in the sunlight of her smile. Never to relish the fresh breeze of her bracing humor.

As for the other so-called choice, it was not one whit more appealing. If she survived her grief, would Lucy ever forgive him for breaking his oath and allowing the destruction of her child? Would having her alive but hating him be any better than letting her die with words of love on her lips? He faced two unbearable choices, yet if he did not sanction one or the other the result would be doubly tragic.

Dear God, let me choose well.

The sound of Mrs. Sowerby's voice called Drake back. "Don't listen to him, your lordship. How many babies has he delivered, I'd like to know?"

The doctor sputtered. "Enough to know what needs to be done here."

"Nonsense," snapped Mrs. Sowerby. "You only attend a birth if the folks are rich. Even then you think it beneath you."

She turned to Drake. "If you'll trust me, milord, there is another way. 'Tisn't easy, but I believe we must try. I know Miss Lucy will pine away for that baby. And the little one? You managed to cling to life without your mam, but most babies don't."

It was true, Drake realized. This was not a business judgment about cutting losses or salvaging partial assets out of a bad investment. Choosing death for either Lucy or their child, he could not live with. He must cast his lot with life, with hope.

Drake took Mrs. Sowerby's hands in his. Wizen little claws they were, but soft as kid leather. For all their smallness and softness, they possessed a strange primal strength, as though accumulated from woman to woman through the centuries since the first human infant had been hauled squirming and squalling into the world.

On the back of each gnarled hand he bestowed a kiss. "Do what you can, Mrs. Sowerby. Whatever the outcome, you shall have my lasting gratitude.

He cast a silencing glance at Charles Varoy. "I understand the risks and I take full responsibility."

Mrs. Sowerby offered no false reassurances but turned and groped her way back into the bedchamber. From the triumphant expression she turned on the doctor, Drake wondered if she could see more than she cared to admit.

"Damn it, Drake!" Charles Varoy blustered. "The strain of all this has unhinged you, man. Do you realize you've just entrusted your wife's life to a blind old woman? You will lose them both, see if you don't."

Drake shook his head. "Breeding is a woman's business, Charles. A man sows his seed and after that the woman grows a child and brings it into the world with no further help from him. We have no right to interfere now."

The doctor stalked toward Lucy's bedchamber. "You, my friend, are addle-witted."

"That may be," replied Drake calmly. "But if you try to interfere

with Mrs. Sowerby, I will break your arms.”

His ruddy face mottled with fury, Varoy shouldered his way past Drake. “Never fear. I won’t do a thing until she begs me to salvage what she’s botched. Then I’ll do what I can.”

For all his confident pronouncements, Drake felt far less certain than he’d tried to sound. What if he had doomed both the child and Lucy?



Gasping as though she’d run a mile, Lucy pressed her head back into the pillows, determined to savor this brief respite from her labor. She’d been vaguely aware of the raised voices out in the gallery. Certain that the fate of her baby hung in the balance, she’d managed to wail out her wishes in the matter. Not that they were likely to pay her any mind.

Surely Drake would honor his promise to her. That was one reason why she had confessed her love for him—so he would realize how intolerable a future stretched ahead of them if she lived. The other reason had been purely selfish. Though he might not love her, might actually shrink from the unbidden love she bore him, she could not slip into the dark uncertainty of death without him knowing her feelings.

The strident voices outside her door had fallen to a grave murmur. The battle must be over. She only hoped they had not resolved to save her life in spite of her wishes. If she had to, she would fight them with every last ounce of her strength to protect her baby. But she could feel that strength ebbing away.

The door opened and Mrs. Sowerby felt her way inside. The servant girl who was bathing Lucy’s forehead dropped her cloth and ran to guide the old woman over to the bed.

Lucy could feel another pain beginning to build, a very hard one, unless she missed her guess. She had to talk quickly before the doctor returned.

“What did they say? Won’t hurt the baby will they?”

Mrs. Sowerby fumbled for her hand. Finding it, she gave a reassuring squeeze. “Nobody’s going to touch that baby, my dear. Not until he’s born at any rate, and then only to take the very best care of his wee lordship.”

In spite of the pain, Lucy’s whole body relaxed. Tears of relief

stung in her eyes. She clung to Mrs. Sowerby's tiny hand until the contraction spent itself.

"How... how soon will the doctor operate?" It was what she wanted but her nerve still quailed at the thought of the knife.

"He won't." Mrs. Sowerby patted Lucy's arm. "I'm going to do all I can to help you bring this strapping young Strickland into the world."

"Help *me*?" Lucy writhed in the tangled bed linens. She wished she could crawl away from her own body and the frightening forces that now possessed it. "I can't do this. I'm so tired, I want to sleep forever, somewhere dark and quiet where there isn't any pain."

"You're not a flighty girl anymore, my dear. You're a woman. This baby is going to need you warm and alive, not cold in your grave. Think of Lord Silverthorne. He needs you, too."

Lucy pushed a damp curl back from her forehead. "I am the last... person he needs. Brought him nothing but turmoil. He's better off... without me."

"Nonsense." Mrs. Sowerby leaned close and whispered. "He's been without you these past weeks and there isn't a soul in Nicholthwait who'll tell you he was better off. Don't desert him again, now that he's got you back."

Before Lucy could reply, another contraction gripped her. The pain was less with this one but the pressure unbearable. She felt like an orange being squeezed for every last drop of juice. It forced a deep, rasping moan from her.

"You need to push, don't you?" asked Mrs. Sowerby.

Limp and spent in the wake of it, Lucy could only nod.

"Then your rest may be coming soon, my dear. For the next little while, though, you're going to have to work hard and do as I tell you. For the child's sake and his lordship's. Can I count on you?"

Again Lucy nodded. Knife or no knife, there was no way she could survive many more spasms like the last one. If Mrs. Sowerby needed her help to bring her baby safely into the world, she would try. After all she had put him through she owed it to Drake to bear him a healthy heir.

She felt the forces gathering again. As she began to strain the older woman coaxed her. "Let it build my dear. Don't fight. Give yourself over to it. When it reaches its crest, bear down with all your might. Push from deep in your bowels. Someone clear these bedclothes out of the way and help me get her knees up."

Lucy started at a gentle probing touch inside her birth passage.

“Don’t fret, my dear,” the midwife soothed her. “I have to feel what your body’s doing. Just as I thought, you’re ready. It shouldn’t take much longer to bring this wee one into the world.”

Easy enough for Mrs. Sowerby to say. The next hour felt like an eternity to Lucy, as the midwife crooned encouragement for her to push through one strong contraction after another.

“Almost there. I can feel the head coming!” Mrs. Sowerby cried triumphantly.

Several more contractions racked Lucy. Then, as if from a long distance, she heard Mrs. Sowerby. “There’s the head crowned. Go easy now. There’s a good lass. Just let the rest of this wee one ease out.”

A sharp, intense pain, different from the others, made Lucy scream in agony.

“The baby’s shoulder must be fetching up on the pubic bone.” Lucy heard the doctor say as the contraction passed and the pain receded slightly. “I knew something like this would happen. How you talked Drake into—”

“Keep your mouth shut, or I’ll call for someone to toss you out,” barked Mrs. Sowerby. “Someone rummage in my bag and find that crock of tallow I brought.”

To Lucy’s surprise, the doctor did not say another word.

“Brace yourself, my dear,” urged Mrs. Sowerby. “What I’ve got to do now is going to hurt like the very devil, but it’s the only way to save your baby.”

Lucy sucked in a great breath of air. “Do it,” she gasped, clenching her teeth against more pain to come.

It was even worse than she’d feared—a wrenching, rending torment of unplumbed depths. Then a peaceful, painless darkness opened before her and she fled into it. Later there was light, and ministering angels fed her with the nectar of heaven.



The vicar looked hopefully into Drake’s eyes. “You’ve been away quite a time my boy. Have you glad tidings for a proud grandfather?”

Not trusting himself to speak at first, Drake shook his head slowly and dropped onto the kneeling bench beside his father-in-law. How

he envied the older man's childlike faith. A lifetime of carefully cultivated pessimism weighed down his heart. "I put Mrs. Sowerby in charge. She thinks there's chance to save both Lucy and the baby. Varoy doesn't agree."

The vicar laid a comforting hand on Drake's. "At least this way, whatever happens, they'll be together."

Drake sighed. He could not take much consolation in that thought.

Squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his hands in supplication, he let his lips move in the familiar words of prayers he'd uttered all his life. His thoughts ranged beyond the confines of the chapel and beyond the present hour. Opening the treasure chest of his memory, he drew out image after image of Lucy from their brief marriage.

Lucy, as she had looked on their wedding night, brushing out her golden curls before the looking glass. How the sight and scent of her had inflamed him! Lucy, smudged and tousled amid the jubilant celebration of the miners' rescue. Lucy, quivering at his touch then lying spent and contented within the circle of his arms. Now those memories glowed with a special new aura, the priceless knowledge that she had grown to love him.

"...deliver us from evil..." Drake stumbled in his prayer by rote. The crushing weight on his heart was more than he could bear. He almost wished Lucy had not confessed her love for him. It would make her loss infinitely more painful, glimpsing what they might have shared together.

Hearing the deliberate tread of footsteps behind him, he glanced around. Charles Varoy wandered into the chapel, looking utterly dazed. He dropped heavily onto the pew beside Drake.

"Charles!" Drake grabbed the doctor by the arms. "Is it over? What's happened?"

Neither Drake's rough grasp nor his abrupt interrogation seemed to penetrate the doctor's strange bemusement.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," he murmured to himself. "She just greased her hands up with tallow and..."

"And what, Charles? Who greased whose hands? For pity's sake, man tell me—are my wife and child alive?"

"I could never have done it." The doctor shrugged, holding up his hands. "Far too big. Not the kind of thing a gentleman would do, even with lives at stake..."

Drake was just about to strike some sense into him when the

chapel door eased open and one of the maid servants led Mrs. Sowerby in. Her face looked drawn and exhausted. Her clouded eyes glistened. Pushing past the befuddled doctor, Drake approached and took her hands.

He was about to ask the question he dreaded putting into words when he heard a sound approaching from outside the chapel. Closer and closer it came, the high, almost feline howl of a newborn infant. Even with his scant experience of such things, Drake thought it sounded like a lusty, healthy cry.

Mrs. Sowerby turned and held out her arms as a maidservant entered, bearing the well-swaddled baby. Taking the child, she offered it to Drake.

“My wife?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

A triumphant smile spread across the old woman’s face and Drake recalled a Bible verse he’d read during many a matins and evensong. “Beautiful are they... that bring good tidings.”

“She’s a brave, hardy lass. We’ve given her a sleeping draught but she should be right as rain in a week or so.”

Gingerly gathering the tiny but vocal creature into his arms, Drake bowed his head. His heart was suddenly too full and his throat too constricted to speak. Clutching the squalling infant to his breast, he baptized it with a father’s tears.

Chapter Twenty-six

SHE COULDN'T BE dead after all. Lucy decided as she groped feebly toward consciousness. For one thing, she hurt too much. Not the excruciating rigors of childbirth, which her memory had already begun to mute. Her body did throb with a dull ache, though, a dying echo of the pain that had propelled her into merciful oblivion.

If she had managed to survive the ordeal, what about her baby? The thought sent Lucy scrambling up the slippery slope toward full awareness. Her eyelids fluttered, letting in the soft, warm sunlight of an almost-summer morning. Her other senses reached out, searching for signs of her baby. She heard no cries or cooing. She felt no squirming bundle tucked into bed beside her. During her stay with Rosalind Beaumont, she had become familiar with the irresistible milky scent of an infant. She could detect no such smell now.

Fighting down her mounting panic, Lucy wrested her eyes fully open. Her skittish glance swept the room. One of the maids stood at the window looking outside, the only other person in her bedchamber. Lucy saw no evidence of a baby's presence nor that one had ever been there.

"P-please," she croaked from parched lips.

The girl at the window started. Quickly regaining her composure, she approached the bed. Though she smiled brightly, Lucy could see she bore a look of strain and fatigue around her eyes.

"So you're awake at last, ma'am. Is there anything I can get for you?"

The answer seemed so obvious, Lucy wanted to scream. She held out her empty arms.

"My baby," she rasped. "What's become of my baby? Is he alive? Is he healthy?"

The girl smiled more broadly than ever. "Indeed, ma'am, alive and well."

Lucy let her feeble arms drop to the coverlet. As tears gushed from her eyes, she was powerless to stop them.

"Strong and healthy according to the doctor, and such a cunning wee one. The first lass born into the Strickland line in five hundred

years, so Mr. Talbot says. I'll go fetch her for you, ma'am, now that you're awake."

Before Lucy could voice any of the insistent questions that clamored in her thoughts, the maid slipped away. Tears of relief turned rapidly to tears of another kind.

Dumbfounded by the sudden revelation, she could scarcely grasp it. A girl? Her child was a girl. The propensity for Stricklands to breed sons was legendary in the Lake Country. The Silverthorne title and estates had passed down father to son without fail since the Middle Ages.

Through her tears, Lucy laughed bitterly at the irony. Wed for the sole purpose of furnishing a male heir, she had born the first Strickland daughter in centuries. Drake would find it no laughing matter. Now he was saddled with a wife he did not want and a girl child who could do nothing to stop his unscrupulous relatives from inheriting the estate he'd labored most of his life to restore.

"Here she is, ma'am." The maid breezed back in bearing Lucy's child. "Such a bonny baby. The way she's chewing on her wee fist, I'd say she's hungry."

She tucked the baby in beside her mother.

Lucy reached out with her free hand and ran her little finger over the baby's downy pink cheek. Grabbing on with tiny red claws, the infant popped Lucy's fingertip into her mouth and began sucking energetically.

"They're right," Lucy breathed. "You are a precious little creature."

Extricating her finger, she tugged down the low-cut bodice of her nightgown and rolled gingerly onto her side. Pinching her nipple erect, she brushed it across the baby's cheek toward her mouth as she had watched Mrs. Beaumont do. The child shaped her tiny rosebud mouth into a ravenous O and began to suckle.

"What a clever girl you are," Lucy crooned, nuzzling her chin against the baby's modest thatch of dark hair. Overcome by potent maternal passions, she could not bring herself to regret that the tiny miracle enfolded in her arms was not a boy.

"His lordship looked so peaceful with his wee princess nestled in his arms, I hadn't the heart to wake him," said the maid.

Her words were so contrary to anything Lucy had expected, that for a moment they refused to have meaning for her.

"Lord Silverthorne... was holding the baby?" she ventured at last.

"I should say!" The girl gave an indulgent chuckle. "From the minute Mrs. Sowerby gave her to him, he wouldn't let anyone else have her 'cept the vicar and then not for very long. I never would've taken the master for a man to dote on a baby so."

Lucy pondered the idea. A year ago, she would have agreed entirely. Now, she knew better. Drake had a wealth of tenderness in him, together with protective instincts of primal ferocity. Perhaps all that kept them in check was a fear of rejection. If any man had cause to fear such a thing, surely it was one who had never known a family's love. Until now, Drake had been obliged to lavish all his care upon his people. Whatever affection he might feel for her, a daughter could not continue his work.

"So..." She hesitated, scarcely able to frame the words. "Lord Silverthorne wasn't disappointed... in a girl?"

"Disappointed? Ma'am, have you not heard a word I've said? If that was disappointed, I'd hate to see him jubilant. Why, the way he took on, you'd think he was the first man ever to become a father. I'll go get you a bite to eat, now that you're awake. You'll need to feed well if you mean to nurse young Missy."

As the maid bustled away, Lucy pressed the baby even closer. Though her body lay torpid, her thoughts ranged far and wide at an anxious gallop. This crumb of hope frightened her after the peaceful resignation of despair.

Drake loved the baby even though he hadn't sired her. Even though she was not the heir he so desperately needed. Was it possible he could love a wife even though she had brought disgrace on his proud name?



"Lucy! Miranda-a-a!!"

Drake lurched bolt upright in his bed, still fully dressed from the night before. Sweat beaded his hairline and his heart pounded like the Spaniard's hooves at a dead gallop. He had dreamed of two smiling, golden-haired men who took his wife and daughter away while he lay bound and helpless to stop them.

The baby! Drake hauled the bedclothes this way and that, searching for some sign of his missing child. They hadn't been able to pry her out of his arms the previous night, after Mrs. Sowerby had laid her there. He had borne her throughout the house,

showing her off to all the servants. He'd ordered the finest vintages in his wine cellar breached so the household could toast his daughter's safe arrival. If it had been within his power, he'd have ordered the whole county roused from their beds with a twenty-one gun salute.

A tidal wave of paternal pride and love had demolished the once invulnerable dam of his reserve. When she'd dozed, he'd declared her a well-behaved little angel. When she'd squalled, he'd laughed delightedly at her spirit. He'd held her, kissed her and crooned to her. From out of nowhere he'd named her Miranda, for Prospero's beautiful, beloved daughter in *The Tempest*. When Mrs. Maberley and the maids had begged leave to hold her for just a minute, he'd jealously resisted their entreaties.

Miranda's less faithful admirers had taken to their beds at last, in the early hours of the morning. Her besotted Papa had remained awake and watchful, whispering of the grand future he planned for her. Ponies, seaside holidays, beautiful gowns, books, the finest education money could buy. At last, with his precious daughter cradled protectively in his arms, he'd stretched out on his bed and closed his eyes. He only meant to rest them for a minute.

He'd wakened just now to find the baby gone, spirited away as if by black magic.

Barreling out of his bedchamber, he almost bowled over Mr. Talbot, bearing a well-laden breakfast tray. In spite of his agitation, the aroma of food made Drake's stomach rumble piteously. He could not remember having eaten since that midnight snack in Mrs. Maberley's kitchen. Hungry as he was, food would have to wait on more urgent matters.

"Talbot, raise an alarm. Someone has taken the baby!"

The butler tried to look solemn, but an indulgent smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Yes, sir. Nell fetched the child. The mistress was anxious to see her."

Drake's alarm waned in a long, slow hiss of exhaled breath. After all Lucy had done to protect the child, even putting her own life at risk, Drake knew he could rest easy if Miranda was with her. Lifting a cover from one of the dishes on Talbot's tray, he bolted a scrap of fried ham. Never had he tasted anything so delicious.

Drake relieved his butler of the tray and headed back through his open bedroom door. Now that he knew Miranda was safe, he was in no rush. Let Lucy enjoy some private time becoming acquainted

with their daughter as he had.

“One more thing, milord,” said Talbot.

Drake raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“About Master Neville,” continued the butler. “As far as I can tell, he spent the night in the library. Will he be staying? Should I make up his usual room?”

Drake shook his head. “Get him a bite to eat, though—something to stay his stomach for a journey.”

Half an hour later, Drake entered the library feeling like a new man. He found his cousin doggedly consuming an enormous breakfast with the air of a convict devouring his last meal.

“I’m glad to hear it all went well last night,” said Neville between bites. “With your wife, I mean.” He sounded subdued, but sincere. “Have you decided yet what you plan to do with me?”

Drake seated himself opposite his cousin who looked to have aged several years in a single night. Was there hope this perpetual adolescent might yet mature into a man?

“I don’t mean for you to get off from this with merely a scare. It would be an exercise in folly sending you back to London—too great a temptation to lapse back into bad habits and worse company. What you need is a clean break from your old life and a chance to prove yourself.”

Neville’s pasty complexion took on an even paler cast. But he squared his shoulders with an air of desperate resolution. “Where will you send me?”

“The Nova Scotia colony. I recently bought a shipyard in a garrison town called Halifax. I need a manager who is willing to apply himself and learn the business.”

“Halifax? Never heard of it.” Neville brightened. “Who knows but I couldn’t master the operation?”

“One other proviso, Neville.”

“Yes?”

“Phyllida and Reggie are to accompany you. I want you to take the boy in hand. He’s not a bad fellow, just needs someone to keep his mother from molly-coddling him.”

“Phyllida, eh?” Neville looked less enthusiastic about this part of the scheme for his rehabilitation. “I don’t suppose that point’s negotiable?”

Drake smiled ruefully. “I’m particularly resolved upon it. With the birth of my daughter, it is altogether likely that you and

Reginald will inherit Silverthorne one day. I want you both prepared to continue the work I've begun."

"You had a daughter *this* time, against all odds," said Neville. "Plenty of chances to breed a whole nursery full of potential heirs, though. Why bother putting Reggie and me through our paces?"

Drake rose abruptly. Neville had alluded to the one dark cloud on his presently bright horizon. "It was a difficult birth. My wife may not wish to go through something like that again."

Though Mrs. Sowerby assured him Lucy would be quite capable of bearing more children, Drake had misgivings. He'd been with her for little enough of her labor. From what he'd seen, he doubted she would want to go through another ordeal like the one she'd barely survived. If she decided against having more children, he would honor her wishes... difficult as it would be to refrain from making love to her.

Neville grimaced. "Rum luck, old man."

Suddenly, Drake remembered that his cousin's machinations might have cost Lucy her life. He savored his parting words to Neville.

"By the way, for propriety's sake, you and Phyllida had better get married."

He tossed the remark over his shoulder, never looking back. Not even when he heard something of substantial bulk hit the floor.



Hearing the door of her bedchamber ease open, Lucy glanced up then quickly averted her eyes again. Drake had come at last.

Fiercely she pretended to concentrate on the baby nursing at her breast. From what Lucy could tell, her daughter was not drawing much actual milk, but she seemed content to suckle anyway. Keeping her eyes trained on the dark silky down of the baby's hair, she waited and waited for Drake to speak.

He stood near the door for the longest time, quiet and motionless. When at last she worked up the nerve to slant a covert glance in his direction, she thought his dark eyes glistened suspiciously.

As well they might. He had gone to great lengths, even wedding a wife he didn't want, to secure a suitable heir to his title. Now all his plans lay in ruins and he was saddled with a spouse who had inconveniently fallen in love with him, contrary to her promise.

"I'm sorry." Though she tried keep her voice steady it broke and unbidden tears brimmed in her eyes.

Inwardly Lucy raged at her uncontrollable emotions. She did not want to coerce Drake into maintaining their marriage out of guilt or a sense of duty. She had failed to fulfil the conditions of their union. Why should he remain bound to keep up his end of the bargain?

He took a cautious step nearer the bed. "Sorry?" he murmured in a voice thick with emotion. "Why should you be sorry?"

"Must you make me say it again?" She could not bring herself to meet his gaze, for fear of what she would see there. "Sorry I brought disgrace on the Silverthorne name. Sorry I..."

Lucy hesitated. Never in a million years would she regret the birth of her daughter. In spite of what the maid had told her, she could scarcely expect Drake to share those feelings. The child was not his, after all. She could not save his life's work from falling into unworthy hands.

"Sorry I did not bear you the heir you need. Sorry..."

Again the word stuck in her throat. She would never regret loving Drake. She was proud to have achieved the perception and maturity to care for a man so vastly worthy of it. For his sake though, for the burden of unwanted obligation it placed upon him, she was sorry.

"Sorry I broke my most important promise to you. I swear I will make amends for all of it. Only a trusted few know that I am not in Florence with Mr. Dalrymple. If I went away, took an assumed name, you could still petition Parliament for a divorce. I would only ask for my baby's sake that you provide for us as you have provided for Mrs. Beaumont and her son."

"No, Lucy. No." Drake staggered the last few steps to her bedside where he fell to his knees. "You must never leave me again. Never! If you do, I will die. Dear Heaven, don't you see? I love you better than my next breath." Brokenly, he poured out his heart to her. "I would give my last breath to keep you from harm, both of you. And I would not exchange our priceless daughter for a brace of boys."

"But the scandal. Everyone thinks I left you and ran away with—" Lucy's voice caught. "I could never expect a proud man like you..."

"Pride be damned." Drake's dark eyes glowed with the earnestness of his declaration. "Pride's cold and hollow. Any man with a crumb of sense would trade it for... love."

With all her heart, she longed to believe him. But did she have the courage?

“I’m not worthy of you. I’ve proven that a hundred times.”

“Worthiness has nothing to do with it, either.” The intensity of Drake’s tone and his gaze convinced Lucy. “For years I struggled to be worthy of love from anyone, without success. Then you came into my life, bringing love like an unexpected gift. You never said the words until last night but I felt it just the same. Haven’t you felt my love, all these months?”

In the garden of the English language, his words were not the most beautiful flowers, nor the most fragrant. Yet they spoke of a love with deep, tenacious roots, one that would bear fruit of inexpressible sweetness.

Not trusting herself to reply any other way, Lucy nodded. With her eyes, she begged Drake to kiss her.

He brushed her cheek and the baby’s with delicate kisses. Then, finding her lips, he kissed her again, softly but deeply.

One last obstacle remained.

Silverthorne.

Drake’s deep sense of duty to his people was what had made him wed her in the first place.

“The baby. She can’t inherit your title, can’t look after your people.”

A hint of regret now shadowed Drake’s loving gaze.

Lucy ached for him.

“I will do everything I can to ensure that Silverthorne doesn’t fall into unsuitable hands. But you and our daughter are all the world to me. I wouldn’t give you up, even for Silverthorne.”

He kissed her again. In his fervent but gentle salute, Lucy had no choice but to acknowledge the truth of his love for her.

Perhaps the past did not matter. Perhaps only the future mattered. In the years to come, she would strive with all her heart to be worthy of Drake and to love him as he so richly deserved.

As he continued to kiss her, Drake’s hand stole up to cup Lucy’s free breast. Suddenly, she felt the soreness in her body melt into the delicious ache of desire.

Drawing back from her, Drake looked deep into her eyes as a wry smile played across his expressive mouth. “Besides, Mrs. Sowerby tells me there is no reason in the world why we cannot try for a boy in a few months’ time. After what you’ve been through this time, I would not blame you if you decide against it...” His voice trailed off wistfully.

Her eyes shining with tears of happiness, Lucy drew Drake's head down to rest upon her breast beside the baby, now sated and sleeping. Nuzzling her cheek against his dark hair, she replied in a husky whisper, "I can hardly wait."

THE END

Dear Reader,

I was thrilled when Harlequin Enterprises recently gave me back the publishing rights to *A Gentleman of Substance*, which had been out of print in English for many years. This Regency love story about a marriage of convenience between a solitary viscount and a spirited vicar's daughter was one of my best-selling Harlequin Historicals® in North America and many countries around the world.

The story and its compelling cover by renowned artist Pino Daeni was a favorite of readers and reviewers. *Affaire de Coeur* praised its "nearly flawless plot, well-dimensioned characters and a flame that will set your heart ablaze with every emotion possible!" *A Gentleman of Substance* was nominated for *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Award Best Historical Regency of 1999.

Is it any wonder I was excited to introduce Drake and Lucy to a new and wider audience of romance readers, including you? Besides an e-book, I am releasing trade paperback and larger print editions with a wonderful new cover by Kim Killion. Since even the best books are not without their flaws, I went back through the manuscript making revisions based on what I have learned during two decades in the publishing industry. Nothing but my very best is good enough for my readers!

As I reread the story for the first time in many years, I found myself often reaching for the tissue box, moved by the strong emotion of the story and characters I came to care about all over again. Whether you are reading *A Gentleman of Substance* for the first time or revisiting an old favorite, I hope that Drake and Lucy's unfolding love story will touch our heart too!

Excerpt from “Scandal on His Doorstep”

The infant’s howls drew nearer, penetrating the flimsy walls and door of Annabelle’s rooms. The sound took her back to the nursery at Eastmuir and the endless succession of young cousins she’d tended while living on the charity of her aunt and uncle. Would someone not take pity on the poor little creature and make an effort to soothe it?

Apparently not, for the cries grew increasingly shrill as they approached. Then someone knocked frantically on Annabelle’s door. Suppressing a squeak of fright, she seized the poker from her small hearth and edged toward the door. Though this lodging house stood on the fringe of fashionable Mayfair, the immediate neighborhood was rather unsavory. She hoped to find work as a governess soon and move to a more respectable address.

“Who’s there?” she shouted, trying to sound bolder than she felt. “You must have come to the wrong place!”

“Annabelle?” A familiar masculine voice called back, though she had never heard it sound so thoroughly rattled.

“Jack, is that you?” She stepped closer to the door but did not open it. “What are you doing here at this hour? I thought I made it clear I do not want your help.”

His charity—that was what she had spurned time and again since Frederick had been killed in an outpost skirmish, defending the Portuguese border. Was it because she had endured her fill of charity during her youth? Or could she not bear to take anything from the man she’d secretly loved more than her late husband?

“Never mind about that!” Jack snapped. “It is I who need *your* help. Please, just open the door!”

Through all this, the baby continued to cry harder than ever. Did Jack have a child with him? And what sort of help could he want from her? Her only hope of getting answers to those questions would be to let him in. Besides, some of her unsavory neighbors might complain about the noise and she did not want any trouble with them.

Annabelle dropped the fire poker then unfastened the bolts that gave her some illusion of safety. When she opened the door, Jack strode in without awaiting any further invitation. He carried a large

basket from which the insistent cries emanated.

"Is that a baby?" she demanded in a tone of disbelief as she shut the door behind him.

She did not bother to bolt it. In spite of the bewildering nature of his visit, Jack's presence still had the power to make her feel safe... in a physical sense at least.

An observer might have thought otherwise, for Frederick's cousin had a wild, distracted look about him. He wore no hat and his golden brown hair fell in disarray. Hazel eyes that so often sparkled with carefree spirits now darted restlessly. Jack's ruggedly attractive features had a haunted, desperate look.

Annabelle had never seen him in such a state. It alarmed her.

"Of course it's a baby!" He set the basket down. "What else could produce such a racket?"

"Whose baby is it?" Annabelle dropped to her knees and lifted the squalling, squirming bundle of blankets from the basket. "How do you come to have it?"

Had he rescued the child from danger or abuse? That would certainly be in keeping with his nature. Annabelle remembered how he had often protected her during their younger years. Her antagonism toward him softened.

"She is mine." The words spewed from Jack's mouth, bitter as bile. "At least she might be. Someone left her on our doorstep with a note. She was crying when we found her but I got her back to sleep. Then she woke up and began to cry again. After that, nothing we did could make her stop. No one at my house knows the first thing about infants."

He spoke faster and faster, as Annabelle had heard the old King was apt to do when a fit of madness came upon him. Was Jack going mad or did this child truly belong to him? That last thought dealt Annabelle a sharp pang of dismay, but she had no time to dwell on it.

The baby's howling eased a little when she picked it up from the basket and began to rock it in her arms while making soothing sounds. But it did not stop crying altogether. That came as no surprise to Annabelle. Her nose wrinkled at the reek the poor little creature gave off. When she wiped a tear from the baby's flushed cheek, its head turned and its tiny mouth rooted toward her finger.

"*Nothing* you did could stop her crying?" she echoed Jack's remark in a scathing tone. "Did it not occur to you to feed the poor

child? Or change her linen?"

"Not exactly." Jack sounded defensive and rather lost.

That was so unlike him, Annabelle could not stifle a flicker of sympathy—little as he deserved it.

"She is such a tiny little mite." He sounded as if that made the baby somehow *more* intimidating. "I was afraid I might drop her or... break her."

Annabelle rolled her eyes. "Babies are not as fragile as you think. Now I must clean her bottom before she gets a rash... if she doesn't have one already."

She carried the child to the small table where she ate her meals. "Don't just stand there, Jack, make yourself useful. Pour a bit of hot water from the kettle into the ewer to warm up what's there. Test it with your finger to make certain it isn't too hot."

Jack regained a little of her respect by hastening to do as she bid him. The baby's fussing quieted further when Annabelle peeled off her wet, soiled linen and prattled to her in a soothing tone.

As she washed the child's bottom, she ordered Jack to fetch a pair of small towels. "Once she is dried off, I will wrap her in one of these for now. But she will need proper napkins very soon."

Jack nodded meekly then watched with an air of awe as Annabelle folded and tucked the cloth snugly around the baby's bottom. When she picked it up and began to walk back and forth, the exhausted child snuggled against her shoulder.

"Bless you, Annabelle!" Jack sank onto the chair by the fire as if he'd just survived a harrowing ordeal. "I felt certain you would know what to do. I am in your debt."

His sincere gratitude was hard to resist. For her peace of mind, Annabelle knew she must resist it and everything else about Jack Warwick. He'd long since made it clear he cared for her only as a friend. Besides, she was still in mourning for his cousin... though her heart held more guilt than grief.

"The poor little thing is quiet for the moment, but she won't stay that way long if she is not fed." How could the child's mother have abandoned her to the mercy of Jack and his equally irresponsible friends? Annabelle could not decide whose behavior vexed her worse—the neglectful mother or the man who'd gotten her with child out of wedlock.

"Can you not feed her?" Jack pleaded. "What does she need? Tell me and I will fetch it."

Annabelle shook her head. Were *all* gentlemen this ignorant of anything to do with child rearing? “She needs milk from her mother or a wet nurse. And before you ask—no, I cannot provide that service.”

Striving to conceal her embarrassment, she explained how only a woman who had borne and recently suckled a child could nurse another infant. Jack shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation. No doubt men like him believed the female bosom had been designed exclusively for their pleasure.

“It is not easy to find a good wet nurse in the city at a moment’s notice,” Annabelle warned him. “You do not want one who drinks or is diseased. The best thing you can do is locate the child’s mother quickly, before her milk dries up.”

When Jack cast her a bewildered look, Annabelle could not contain her annoyance. “The child looks to be three or four months old. Seek out the women you and your friends... bedded last winter. Surely it cannot be *that* many.”

“Between the three of us, over several months?” Jack hung his head like a naughty schoolboy. “It could prove a challenge. How will we manage in the meantime?”

“You could take her to the Foundling Hospital I suppose,” Annabelle suggested, though she had no intention of letting him do any such thing.

“No!” Jack shot to his feet. “She has already been abandoned once. I will not do it to her again.”

His answer went a great way to soothe Annabelle’s antagonism.

“I don’t understand.” He began to pace the small sitting room, keeping as far from Annabelle and the baby as the limited space allowed. “Why did her mother not come to me or my friends as soon as she found herself with child? We would have assisted her.”

“Clearly the poor woman thought otherwise.” Annabelle held the baby in a protective embrace.

It was several years since she’d last cradled a sleeping infant, yet the action came as naturally to her as breathing. There had been a time when she professed herself heartily sick of caring for babies. Yet suddenly she felt as if something missing had been restored to her.

But that was ridiculous. She did *not* miss walking the floor all night to prevent a colicky baby from waking the whole house. Nor changing smelly, soiled linen. Nor having her clothes spit up on.

Jack squared his shoulders and inhaled a deep breath. "First thing in the morning, we will begin looking for the mother. Until we locate her, can the baby stay here with you?"

"Absolutely not!" Annabelle was tempted to thrust the child back into his arms, but feared it might waken. Besides, she found herself strangely reluctant to part with the warm, soft armful. "This is no fit place to keep a baby and I am not equipped to care for her."

Jack looked as if she had struck him a hard blow. Annabelle steeled herself to resist his pleading.

"Then will you come back with me to Bruton Street?" He fixed her with an imploring gaze like the one he might have used to coax the baby's mother into his bed. "Our guest room is very comfortable and I will make certain you have everything you need to care for her. Please, Annabelle. I do not ask for my sake but for the child's. She needs you. If you'll do this, I will give you anything you ask!"

Tempted as she was by the prospect of a warm, comfortable bed and the toothsome bounty of Jack's kitchen, Annabelle hesitated. She knew all too well the dangerous folly of becoming attached to a child... or anyone else. Jack's promise to give her anything she wanted was no particular inducement. There was only one thing she had ever wanted from him, and it was the one thing he could not give.